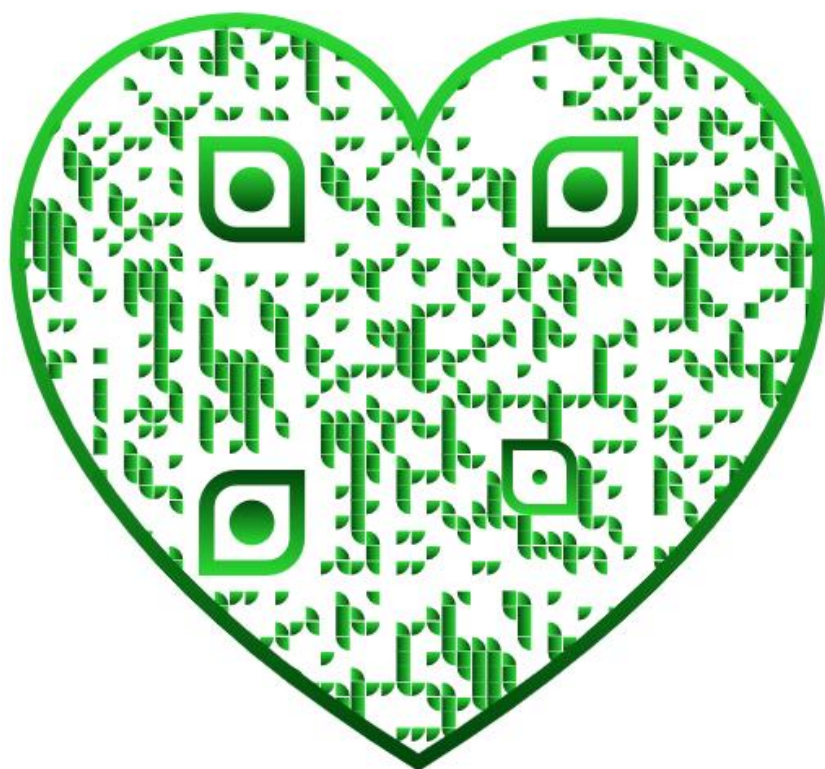


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COMBATANTS WILL BE DISPATCHED!



Natsume Akatsuki
ILLUSTRATION BY
Kakao Lanthanum



2

COMBATANTS

WILL
BE

DISPATCHED!



Natsume Akatsuki
ILLUSTRATION BY
Kakao Lanthanum

A detailed illustration of Alice Kisaragi, a blonde anime-style girl with blue eyes, wearing a white off-the-shoulder shirt and a black tie. She has a large grey cross-shaped hair clip on the right side of her head and a red stylized symbol on her forehead. The background features several grey circular patterns with a cross-like design and small pink silhouettes of figures holding rifles. A black speech bubble with the number '2' is located near the top left.

2

"Giant
crawfish?
Ghosts??
Call in the
power of
science
and bust
them all!"

ALICE KISARAGI

A high-spec android developed with the latest technology the Kisaragi Corporation has to offer. She hates the supernatural.

■ ALICE'S VIEW

I won't accept anything as illogical as the supernatural. Grimm's so-called curses are nothing more than a combination of hypnosis and auto-suggestion.

THIS VOLUME'S MAIN HEROINE

COMBATANTS WILL BE
DISPATCHED!



MOKEMOKEMOKE MOKEMOKEKEKE!!

"That's a
mokemoke.
It's great
boiled."

"Hey, is
that...a
crawfish?"

SNOW

A diligent woman who rose
up from the slums to become
captain of the Royal Guard.

Struggling with loan
payments has brought out
her inner gold digger.

■ SNOW'S VIEW

Oh, I should mention that these woods
belong to the Bashin Tribe.

So named for their tendency to bash in
heads with blunt objects...

AGENT SIX

BUSTING TARGET ① OBNOXIOUS CRAWFISH THAT WON'T STOP SAYING "MOKEMOKE"



"Seriously, Grimm? This hologram is pretty sad."

GRIMM

An archbishop often labeled an occultist.

■ GRIMM'S VIEW

I just wanted to summon the undead!
Like, a ghost, y'know?!
What's with this Gadalkand-looking thing...?

"Okay, I know I'm the one who summoned it, but I seriously have no idea what that is..."

BUSTING TARGET ② SOMEONE'S GHOST-TYPE FAKEMON...?

■RGENT SIX'S VIEW

Rose aside, why are the rest of them making eyes at other guys and not me...?
This sense of defeat is...unacceptable.

"You keep staring at my chest. I wish you would ... look deeper."

HEINE

A dark-skinned demoness with an elite rank.
She's also one of the Demon Lord's Elite Four. She becomes Agent Six's prey yet again.

"I, Snow, may have issues with my personality, but I'm confident in my face and body!"

"Being a hunk doesn't mean you get to toy with a maiden's heart!"

"Delicious! So, so delicious!"

ROSE

A Chimera who can copy the abilities of any monster she eats, just like X'boy.
She's curious to see how consuming mokemoke meat will affect her speech.





"Rgh...?!"

RUSSELL

Title: Russell of the Water.
If you go crazy for boys who look
like girls, this one's for you!

"Sorry to
keep you
waiting,
partner."

The
cavalry's
here."

BUSTING TARI! ENEMY HUMANOID ROBOT

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Special
Crossover Short
Story: God's
Blessing on This
Wonderful Planet!

COMBATANTS WILL BE DISPATCHED!

COMBATANTS

DISPATCHED!

WILL
BE

2

Natsume Akatsuki

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kakao Lanthanum

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ON
NEW YORK

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Combatants Will Be Dispatched! Vol 2
Natsume Akatsuki

Translation by Noboru Akimoto
Cover art by Kakao Lanthanum

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Prologue



“What the hell, Astaroth?! You totally lied to meeeeeee!!”

“L-look, I’m truly sorry about that incident. How about this? They just came out with a new volume of *God’s Blessing on This Wacky World*! I’ll go ahead and send it to you! You really love this series, don’t you? This one’s on us!”

On this particular day, I’m aggressively hounding the person on the line with me.

Who’s on the other end of this video chat, you ask? It’s Astaroth, of course! She’s one of the Supreme Leaders running the Kisaragi Corporation.

“Are you kidding me? So you think my life’s about as valuable as a volume of *KonoSuba* is that it? That’s right, I heard directly from Alice. That hunk of junk you used to send me here has a *fifty* percent chance of failure. I’m getting my revenge for this if I ever make it back to Earth. Tell Lilith I’m going to grope her until she cries! As for you, Astaroth... if you sincerely regret lying to me, the least you could do is marry me and financially support me for the rest of my life! That should just about settle it.”

“S-silence! You’re the one who needs to get it together! Your reports are nothing but mindless drivel! And just what do you mean by ‘if you ever make it back to Earth’...?”

Astaroth snaps back at me, completely ignoring her own responsibility and holding up my latest report in accusation.

“I told you already! As branch manager, I can’t just abandon my precious subordinates...!”

“I’m told that kingdom is short on men due to war. Alice also tells me your squad is made up of pretty young women and girls...”

“And furthermore, we can’t let this so-called Demon Lord’s Army of backward nobodies get away with disrespecting me! Not I, the elite Combat Agent representing Kisaragi on this planet! Any insult to me is an insult to the Kisaragi Corporation! Right?”

On the screen Astaroth tilts her head, frowning.

“W-well, not exactly... It’s not like we chose you for this assignment because we thought you were strong or an elite agent or anything like that... We chose you because we figured you were the person most likely to stubbornly cling to life no matter the

circumstances...”

“Ouch. You could have at least *tried* to flatter me. *Sigh*. Anyway! Reinforcements! We need more! The Demon Lord’s Army uses *actual* magic. It makes them really annoying to fight. Even if you can’t send a hundred Combat Agents, could you at least spare a couple more mutants?”

Including myself, there are currently ten Combat Agents assigned to this planet. Mutant warriors are as overpowered as they come, but we’ve only got one.

“We’d love to send you reinforcements...but we’ve got our own problems at the moment. The Heroes are staging a massive counteroffensive. We’re stretched so thin we’ve had to send Belial and Lilith off to the frontlines. Even with their help, the situation’s bad. If anything, we’d rather have you back here...”

Astaroth casts a hopeful gaze my way...

“I doubt an old fossil like me with outdated enhancements would be much help. Let me handle the situation here. I’m confident you’ll turn things around over there.”

“Didn’t you just say you were an elite Combat Agent...?”

Nope, no way. I’m not going anywhere near battlefields so dangerous that even having Belial or Lilith around won’t guarantee victory.

“In that case, we’ll leave that planet in your capable hands. We won’t be able to send you any more support under the current circumstances, so we’re relying on your wit and ingenuity.”

Seriously?

“...Could we at least get some more of the latest equipment? Even if you can’t spare the manpower, you could at least send us supplies, right...?”

“...Based on the reports you and Alice have filed, we have a decent grasp of the situation over there. From here on out, we’d like you to focus on invasion preparations rather than spying.”

Astaroth says this matter-of-factly while blatantly ignoring my request.

“Now wait just a goddamned minute! What happened to the whole ‘you have our full support’ thing? I feel like you’re not taking me seriously. You *are* aware that I can still make you cry from here, right?”

“Look, we’re barely scraping by over here. I know it’s only the two of us on the line, but don’t push your luck. And *you*? Make *me* cry? Ha! You’re welcome to try.”

Astaroth snorts dismissively, a mocking smile on her lips.

“Well, if you insist! You wanna know what they call me now? The Fly! Sure, it’s a stupid nickname, but I promise there’s a good reason

for it. Feast your eyes!”

“V-very well, Agent Six! Your next assignment is to gain more territory; we don’t care how you do it! You are to strengthen our presence on the planet and secure a beachhead for invasion! We look forward to your— I’m sorry! I’m sorry, okay?! Would you pleeease put that thing away?!”





1

It's now been a little over two months since they sent me, a lowly combat operative, to this planet with a suspicious device called an interplanetary teleporter.

They sent me to survey the planet and lay the groundwork for an invasion.

It's been a month since we repelled an invasion and signed a short-term truce with the local competition: an evil organization calling itself the Demon Lord's Army.

With the expiration of the truce, there've been a few skirmishes with the Demon Lord's Army here and there, but they have yet to stage another large invasion.

Their current level of caution is likely due to the presence of my colleagues: Combat Agents dispatched by the Kisaragi Corporation.

Currently, there are only ten operatives, counting myself, assigned to this kingdom.

First off, there's me, Mr. Six.

And then there's...

"Long time no see, Six. Nyeow's the time to put an end to our age-old rivalry!"

The large tiger-headed man purrs in a velvety baritone, standing in front of me with a Western-looking longsword in hand.

"Sounds like fun, Tiger Man. So long as I have this memento of my beloved subordinate, the Whatever Zapper, I can't lose..."

Yes, this is one of Kisaragi's officers, the mutant Tiger Man.

"Since when is Snow's sword a memento? Did something happen to her? And wait a meowment. Why do you get a magic sword?"

"Well, you're a mutant. That makes you a lot stronger than an operative like me. Give me a little bit of a handicap. Also, why are you adding that meowy purring noise to your sentences? It's starting to get a little obnoxious."

Tiger Man is one of the Kisaragi Corporation's midlevel Supreme Leaders.

He may be speaking a little oddly today, but he's a veteran among the mutants, a reassuring presence to have at your back.

"I hearrd putting purrs in the middle of sentences gets you girrrrrls. I used to add little growls here and there, but that just drrove them away."

"Huh, you can get women just by changing how you talk? Can I get in on that?"

Reuniting here in a far-off land, we're eager to test how much stronger we've become. So we've taken over the training grounds here in the kingdom of Grace for a friendly sparring sesh.

"It's not like I've got a trademeowrk on it. Do what you want. At any rate...prrrrepare yourrrrself, Six. You'll see my new powerawr!"

"Bring it, Tiger Man! Don't think operrrratives are always going to be weakerrr than mutants! Hiyaaaaah!"

We each let out a battle cry and begin trading blows with our swords...

With a sharp metallic clang, something goes flying through the air.

"...Oh shit. What do we do, Tiger Man? We just broke Snow's magic sword! She doesn't know I have it."

"N-not my fault! You'rrrrre the one who swiped it! This whole knight thing was yourrrr idea!"

Yup, the object flying through the air is half of Snow's beloved sword.

I look at the sword fragment buried in the ground. Tiger Man and I exchange glances.

We turn to my partner for help. She's been sitting and watching from a corner of the training grounds this whole time.

"Alice! I bet your high-tech brain can figure out a solution!"

"Yes! Prrreeease help us, Meowlice!"

Sitting on the ground with her knees to her chest and watching us as though we're a particularly interesting sideshow attraction is Kisaragi's latest and greatest high-spec pretty-girl android, Alice Kisaragi.

"Fine, fine. Meowlice will enlighten you meatheads. Put the pieces back together using metal glue, then just give it back. It'll end up breaking in battle, and you can say 'Looks like they sold you a lemon. I'll go yell at the merchant for you' while comforting her."

""Perfect!""

Alice, who constantly calls herself a high-spec android, provides Tiger Man and me with a perfect solution.

We quickly get to work grabbing the two halves of the sword and attempting to stick them back together...

“—SIX, WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?! You’ve gone too far this time! Show yourself! I’m going to wring your useless neck!”

A familiar voice echoes into the training ground from the entrance.

I quickly hide the broken sword behind my back. Tiger Man, holding the other half, crushes the piece with his ludicrous grip strength and tosses the shards off into the distance.

...Well, shit. There goes that idea.

And in comes Snow, captain of this kingdom’s Royal Guard.

Sometimes, I think she’d be so hot if she would just keep her mouth shut. But at the moment, with her wild silver hair and bloodshot eyes, she’s a pretty scary sight to behold.

“Where did you put my beloved blade?! Give me back my precious Flame Zapper! I had to take out a five-year loan for it!”

Snow closes the distance, but I keep my cool.

“Oh, that magic sword? You just missed it. Turns out, it became self-aware and realized you weren’t a worthy master. It left on a journey to find its rightful owner.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Magic swords don’t just get up and walk away! Besides, I take good care of her, carefully maintaining her each and every day. Even if she did become self-aware, I’m sure she’d consider me her master... Hey, wait a minute! What’s that behind your back?!”

Snow, who had been rushing toward me at a steady clip, stops in her tracks.

I hold out the remains of her blade.

“Well, the sword just came back from its journey. It ran into the Demon Lord and lost by a hair. It whispered your name with its last breath and returned to being a simple sword.”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

When Snow sees the remains of her blade, her knees give out from under her.

I gently hand the hilt to her. Snow gazes at it forlornly, tears pouring from her eyes.

“...Hey, Six, this is a little purrrainful.”

“Y’know, this is kinda your fault, too, Tiger Man. Help me smooth this over. We can’t fix it now that you crushed the other end.”

Tiger Man half mutters, half purrs out a soft “fiiine” and writes something on a slip of paper, inserting it into the device on his chest.

The device is a mini-teleporter that sends messages to Kisaragi headquarters on Earth.

As operatives for an evil organization, we can use these devices to buy new equipment using our Evil Points.

Eventually, a single sword appears in front of Tiger Man.

Hey wait, that's...

"Oh, Flame Zapper... My sweet Flame Zapper that I polished each night before bed... I remember the day I bought you, dear Flame Zapper... I couldn't sleep from the excitement. Oh, sweet Flame Zapper, you kept me warm on cold nights..."

Snow, who had been cradling the sword and muttering between sobs, glances up sharply.

Her gaze is fixed on the blade Tiger Man has drawn from its black-painted hilt.

"...! Wh-what an amazing piece of craftsmanship...! S-Sir Tiger Man, where did that remarkably beautiful sword come from...?!"

Tiger Man ordered a katana.

Our resident sword maniac recognizes its quality from a single glance and stares at the blade, entranced.

Tiger Man sheathes the blade, and Snow lets out a disappointed sigh.

"Here," he says. "To replace your sworrrd."

"O great Tiger Maaaaan!" Snow clutches the katana to her chest, now spilling tears of joy. Then as if realizing something, Snow sidles up to Tiger Man, keeping the tears welled in her eyes. "O wonderous Tiger Man... Gifting me such a work of art... Perhaps you own others like it?"

"Well, surre. I'm prrrretty fond of weapons, so I have a something of a collection... H-hey! Let go of me right nyeow! Stop strrrroking my chest!"

I doubt Snow could be any more obvious.

Sensing that Tiger Man might be able to feed her sword addiction, Snow smiles coyly and brushes up against him.

"Heh, heh-heh-heh... From the moment we met, I had a feeling you were someone special. I, Snow, am confident in my ability to judge people."

"What arrre you talking about?! You called me a monsterrr and attacked me the meowment you saw me!"

Tiger Man just told me how he changed his way of speaking to draw in the ladies, and yet he still backs away from Snow.

"Congratulations, Tiger Man. Looks like your plan worked."

"I prefer smaller girrrls. One this big is a little outside my prrrference."

Hot damn. Tiger Man is a piece of work! I suppose that's to be expected from a mutant and villain.

—At that very moment, the castle bells ring out in a high-pitched clamor.

Snow has backed far away from Tiger Man after hearing about his “prrrerences,” and at the sound of the bells, she purses her lips into a hard expression.

“An enemy attack! Come on, Six, let’s get going! This is a great chance to win some glory! ...Heh, heh-heh-heh-heh... Time to try this new baby out...!”

Drawing her katana, Snow gazes lovingly at the blade, muttering ominously.



Gunshots ring out under an alien sky.

Each time my assault rifle spits out rounds, the enemies around me randomly take cover.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Kneel before the Kisaragi Corporation’s Agent Six! Be sure to mention my name when they ask who sent you to hell!”

“Boss! Can’t you stop using that line? It makes us sound like the bad guys!”

As I cackle and eliminate the enemy, Rose, the Artificial Chimera, sighs. She keeps the enemy from closing in, kicking the ones that get too close.

“Don’t be ridiculous! This is *war*! Winning is all that matters! They say the good guys always win, right? That means winning justifies everything else! It doesn’t matter how much villainy I’m up to on a daily basis. So long as I win, I’m still the hero!”

“I may not be very smart, but I’m pretty sure you’re wrong there!”

Tiger Man is leading the remaining Kisaragi operatives against the Demon Lord’s Army coming from a different direction.

My squadron is taking on one of the enemy’s elite companies.

Ordinarily, it’s not a force you take on with just five members, but hey, I’m known as Agent Six, Kisaragi’s oldest surviving veteran elite combat operative.

Thanks to the marvels of modern technology, Alice and I use the devastating power of firearms to overpower the demons who brought swords and knives to a gun fight.

Rose backs away from me a bit as I cackle and fire off random shots from my rifle. Snow comes to join me instead, looking quite pleased with herself.

“Six! There’s a lot of them. Use that weird weapon to wipe them all out! I’ve gotten to do enough test cuts with my new sword! I’ll give you a full account of this wonderful blade’s edge over drinks... It slices through flesh like it’s butter...”

“Hard pass on the gory stories! Hang on a sec; I’ll take out the Demon Lord’s Army for you. Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Who’s next on the chopping block? Come get som—”

With a loud *click*, my assault rifle stops firing.

“Um... Uh-oh. Gimme a sec, my gun just jammed...!”

I smack my rifle, trying to remove the jammed round. Snow’s

expression sours with concern.

“H-hey, Six! They’ve surrounded us! H-h-hurry up! Quick!”

“Don’t rush me! Shaking me will only slow me down! Where the hell is Grimm? This is why we have her, isn’t it?!”

Yes, Grimm, Archbishop of the dark god Zenarith.

As a follower of a dark god, she doesn’t do a whole lot during the day, but she’s useful against a large group of enemies like this one.

“She’s the best one to hold off...”

I get the jammed round out of my rifle and turn around to see... Grimm sitting there in her wheelchair, happily asleep and drooling from the corner of her mouth.

“She fell sleep as soon as the battle started.”

“Take advantage of the fact that she’s sleeping and toss her out there!”

A lizard-shaped demon jumps at me while I’m barking orders at Rose.

Just as the demon leaps, its flank gets pumped full of shotgun shells, and it crumples to the ground with a whimper before going still.

“Thanks, Alice! I guess you can be useful from time to time!”

“Yep, I’m the high-spec pretty-girl android Meowlice, after all. But pay attention, here come the next ones.”

The demons in front of us advance, as though they were waiting for Alice’s go-ahead.

I send the requisition I scrawled before battle, then shoot off a burst of rifle fire.

As the demons cower at the gunfire, I grab the teleported object and toss it toward them.

“Scared me for a second there, you bastards! Taste the power of SCIENCE!”

I take cover. The high-yield explosive I tossed into the group of the demons goes off with a blast, cutting down the horde!

3

We’re greeted by an adoring crowd when we return to the city.

“Good work, Man in Black!”

“Man in Black, you’re so dreamy! You’re so cool!”

“Welcome back, Captain Snow!”

“Hey, it’s the Fly! Zip down your fly!”

The phrase “Man in Black” refers to the awesome sight of me dressed in Kisaragi battle armor.

With our string of victories, I've become a favorite among the citizens...

"You goddamned brats! That's the last damned straw! I'm going to shove some Diet Coke and Mentos up your ass!"

"Gaaaaaaah! You're acting like an overgrown child, Fly! Help! HELP!"

I chase after the brat who called me the Fly, but the soldiers who came to greet us hurriedly rush up to stop me.

"Sir Six! I apologize for interrupting your righteous fury, but I have a message from Princess Tillis. She requests your presence at the castle once you've rested. We'll make sure to give the lad a stern talking-to... Sir Six, S-Sir Six! Please don't do that to a child!"

And so we arrive at the tavern that's become our go-to watering hole on this planet.

"Well, here's to our victory! Cheers!"

""Cheers!""

With our reward money in hand, we've come for a celebratory drink.

"...Aaah! There's nothing like a beer after a good day's work! Hey, drinks are on me tonight! Drink up!"

"Hey, Six, pay me the money you owe me before you go off buying everyone drinks."

Alice usually stays home because she doesn't eat or drink, but she decided to tag along tonight. She starts the evening by pouring cold water on the party.

"Thank you, Boss!" Rose cries. "You're the best boss in the world when you're paying for my food! And I look up to you, too!"

"It's so true. I can't say I dislike how generous you can be! But your spending habits make you less than ideal as a partner!" Alice adds.

"Ha-ha! You're far too kind! Food and drinks are on me again on payday!"

"Th-that sounds like praise to you...?" Snow looks at me with exasperation, taking small sips of her drink.

"Huh, it's pretty rare for you to come with us, Alice. Did Lilith give you a digestive system?"

"You've even dropped the pretense of hiding our identities ever since Snow found out about our spying. I suppose I should've expected that given you're a meathead, but still..."

Currently, our position in the kingdom is a bit complicated.

I'm a mercenary hired to lead a squadron and the liaison to the Kisaragi Corporation.

And yet for some reason, Snow, who was promoted back to

captain of the Royal Guard, is still tagging along with our group. She insists she's been assigned to keep an eye on us, but I'm pretty sure she's been sent here to get her out of the way.

I've already explained to the squad members that Alice and I come from another world. At first, they stared at me like I had a few screws loose in my head, but now they've accepted that we're mages from beyond the stars.

"I'm here as part of my investigations into the planet. It's possible that the stuff locals eat is poisonous to humans from Earth. Do you even know where that meat on your plate came from?"

Alice's question prompts me to stare closely at the plate in front of me...

"Hey, barkeep! What do you use in the daily specials I order?"

"Hmm? You've been eating it all this time without knowing? Today's meat is orc. The skirmishes with the Demon Lord's Army's made quality orc meat nice and cheap."

Hearing that, I set my plate to the side.

"What's wrong, Boss? I'll eat it if you don't want it."

"You won't eat grasshoppers, but you're fine with orc? Aren't orcs, well...the things on two legs we fight all the time? Pretty sure they can talk."

I've eaten most things over my career, but I have to admit I'm a little creeped out by the idea of eating sentient creatures I can chat with.

Alice looks curiously at the contents of my plate, while Snow lets out a dismissive snort.

"I didn't realize you had such a delicate stomach," Snow scoffs. "Our kingdom is mostly wasteland, and water is precious. That makes vegetables rare and valuable. But you can find meat everywhere you look. Picky eaters don't last long around these parts. Here, have some supopocchi and poison spoiler."

"Stop that! Don't put that weird crap on my plate! The second one sounds pretty dangerous!"

Snow pushes a plate in front of me, which I promptly shove back in her direction.

Alice chooses that moment to pipe up. "Hey, you lot. You're off tomorrow, right? If you want to earn a little extra money, I'd like your help with a job."

"Sure, but it'll cost you a pretty penny. Mr. Six doesn't come cheap."

"...It's supposed to be your job, too, but whatever..."

Alice rolls her eyes at me. Rose looks over apologetically.

"I'm sorry. I already promised Grimm I'd help her with something tomorrow..."

“Yes, I’m afraid tomorrow is this month’s Zenarith Assembly. Would the rest of you like to come? It’s called an assembly, but so far only Rose and I are attending.”

“Honestly, I kinda wanna see this,” I reply with interest, while Rose raises her face in surprise, as if hearing the news for the first time.

“Wait, what? You didn’t say anything about that! You said we were going to a fun meeting to listen to stories, like a tea party!”

“Sermons about Lord Zenarith are both enlightening and fun! I’ll serve tea, too, so make sure you come! I already paid you for your time by buying you dinner, so no take-backs! Besides, you’re one of the few Zenarith followers around!”

“I don’t remember converting! First Boss pushed that weird badge on me, and now this. Stop trying to drag me into weird things!”

Rose continues her indignant rant while Snow looks over at Alice with shining eyes.

“How much are you paying? I could always use a little extra income to pay off my loans. What do you need me to do?” Snow asks enthusiastically, invading Alice’s personal space.

Alice lets out what sounds like an annoyed sigh, pushing Snow’s face aside. “We’re looking into this.”

Alice points at Snow’s plate.

4

The wilderness of this world is ruthless.

Much of the continent is covered in red wasteland, while the greener areas are covered with deep woodlands filled with deadly ecosystems.

Snow and I are here in these dangerous woodlands...

“Look, Six,” Snow whispers. “*There’s a mokemoke! It’s delicious when boiled! Let’s go over and grab it!*”

“*Mokemoke my ass! Why does something so deadly looking have such a cute name? It’s more likely to eat us than the other way around!*”

We’re hiding among the leaves in the heavily wooded area, watching a dangerous giant creature.

Basically, it’s a crawfish the size of a storage shed.

It looks to have caught a similarly gigantic snake between its pincers.

“*Mokemoke meat loses its gaminess and becomes tender after a nice long boil. The reason they’re called mokemokes is because of their cry...*”

“*Thank you for the explanation, but let’s focus on staying hidden for*

now, 'kay?"

Alice closely watches this battle of the beasts, filming it with her digital camera. *"The life-forms on this planet really love ignoring the laws of physics. There's no way crustaceans can grow that big. So which one's the mokemoke?"*

"The thing with the pincers is the mokemoke. The one that's about to be eaten is a supopocchi. They're pretty tasty, too."

"Can we stop with the commentary and get out of here before they find us?" I plead to the pair with a look of desperation.

"Ah. Look at that, Six, the supopocchi's fighting back. It appears this planet's snakes don't constrict their prey. Seems they smack them with their tails instead. Fascinating."

"We're in luck. Supopocchis don't do that move very often."

"Could you at least stop repeating that name? It makes us sound stupid. Haven't we seen enough here, Alice? Can we move on?"

Sure, this is a Kisaragi-assigned mission, but I'm more than ready to head home.

Fighting back tears, I gingerly turn my back to move away from this spot when a triumphant cry of "*Mokemoke!*" rings out from behind us—

"—Snow, what's with the supopocchi hanging from that tree? Is something that lives here making dried meat out of it?"

"Ah, that? That's how the Bashin tribe marks its territory."

"Let's go home! That can't be good! Are you two missing your sense of self-preservation or something? That looks like a creepy sacrifice!"

With the mokemoke far behind us, we come across the shocking sight of a supopocchi with its head bashed in. It hangs limply from a tree.

"The Bashin tribe are a very aggressive tribe of barbarians. They're highly territorial and tough enough to survive in these woods. Their name comes from the fact that they bash in heads with blunt instruments..."

"This is hardly the time for an anthropology lesson! Something's been following us. If they're that territorial, we should get out of here ASAP. What the hell is wrong with you two today? Usually you're much more eager to run away!"

I nudge Snow along, hoping to urge her to get out of here.

"I'm a professional, Six. Sure, I've half assed some things given the pittance the kingdom pays me. But with how much Alice is paying? You better believe I'll fulfill my duty. My commitment to promises secured with money is ironclad."

So she's admitting she won't follow through on all other

commitments?

Suddenly...

Loud thumps ring out, as though someone is bashing a tree trunk with a hard object.

The sounds are coming from nearby.

In fact, I feel like someone or something has been watching me from that direction for a while now...!

"That sound is happening at regular intervals. Must be some kind of signal."

"Impressive, Alice. Yes, this is how the Bashin tribe calls in reinforcements when they've found their prey..."

Before the two finish their exchange, I take off like a shot!

I lose track of how long I've been running.

Seems I've managed to lose those tribesmen, but when I look around...

"Dammit! I lost them...!"

I ran off, assuming Alice and Snow would follow right behind me, but they're nowhere to be seen.

The bigger problem is that I have no idea where I'm going. Given that I'm on an alien planet, my watch's compass doesn't function properly.

"Uuugh! Where the hell did they go? I bet they're taking their sweet time. And during an emergency, to boot. I'm going to give them an earful when I find them," I grumble, but of course nobody responds.

I'm starting to get a little unnerved by the random screams and cries ringing out from the shadowy forest.

"Well...maybe I shouldn't have left them behind like that. I guess I'll spare them the lecture. Hear that, guys? You can come out now. I'm not mad, honest. I mean, I understand if your legs froze up, and you couldn't run. Not everyone can be like me and keep their wits enough to make a hasty retreat, after all."

I continue rambling, raising my voice a bit. If there is anyone around that understands a word I say, they make no reply. The only sounds I hear from around me are the monstrous cries of wild animals.

The lack of cell phone towers means I can't just call Alice on the phone.

Actually, now that I think of it, does she even have a cell phone? Even if I ordered a radio, it wouldn't do me much good if the other party didn't have a radio of their own...

“Hey, wait...!”

I just need to write a note about my current situation and send it to Kisaragi headquarters. They can then send Alice to pick me up.

She’s smart. She’ll definitely be able to find me once she knows where I am.

I let out a sigh of relief and reach for my memo pad—

“Mokemokemoke!”

I hear a distinct cry from behind me.

I hesitantly turn around, coming face-to-face with a one-armed mokemoke...!

Hoping to intimidate it, I spread my arms widely and let out a wild cry!

“MOKEMOKEMOKEMOKE!!”

“Mo?!”

My sudden actions drive the mokemoke backward.

The mokemoke studies me, foaming from its mouth. I get closer, continuing my mokemoke cry, staying in a ready stance to avoid showing any weakness...!

Just then...

“Mokeke...”

It lets out a soft cry, as if to show it had no aggressive intentions, and lowers its pincer.

Did my desperate cries convince it I was a friend?

Come to think of it, there’s so much about this planet I still don’t understand. The mokemoke, despite its appearance, might actually be a gentle creature. I suppose it’s a wishy-washy thing for an evil minion to believe, but I think I just made a friend here in this dark forest.

The mokemoke gently extends its pincer toward me. I let out a soft chuckle...

As I hold out my hand to shake its pincer, the mokemoke is suddenly split right down the middle.

“GOTCHAAAAA!”

Snow lets out a war cry as she turns my new friend into lunch.

5

We make our way home after our survey of the Cursed Forest’s wildlife.

Once inside the city, we run into Rose and Grimm, who look

rather tired.

“Hey, Boss! Welcome back! How did your survey go? Never mind that, actually! Grimm used this weird ritual and summoned these undeammmp?!”

“Welcome back, Commander! You look a little glum; is something wrong? Now, Rose, there’s plenty of delicious skewers for you! No need to go tattling. Just focus on eating.”

Something about what Rose is saying catches my attention, but Grimm silences her by shoving meat skewers into her mouth.

“Six almost got eaten by a mokemoke in the woods. I saved him in the nick of time, but he hasn’t been the same since. I guess he’s still recovering from getting lost and being attacked by that vicious beast.”

“No, I’m still recovering from the fact that you butchered my friend in front of my eyes! And then you poured soy sauce on him and ate him, you cold-hearted bitch!”

She butchered that poor mokemoke, assuming it was attacking me, then ate it as a snack.

“H-how dare you! I *saved* you from that creature! The least you can say is thanks. And what’s wrong with eating a freshly killed mokemoke? We weren’t going to be able to drag that entire carcass home! You were pretty happy with the meal yourself, if I recall. You were crying tears of joy at how delicious it was!”

“Sure, I ate him, too... I admit it, I ate him! But still!” The only reason I ate him was to put his soul to rest! Since he was dead anyway, it didn’t make a difference. I had to make sure his death wasn’t in vain by making him a part of me. “Never mind that. I heard Rose say something I can’t ignore! Grimm! You summoned undead again, didn’t you?!”

“So what? I’m a follower of Lord Zenarith, god of undeath and disaster! What’s wrong with the archbishop summoning one of his follow-ow-ow-owwww!!!”

Snow grabs Grimm’s face and squeezes her temples, cutting off Grimm’s rant in mid-sentence.

At those words, Alice glances up sharply. “Did you just say undead? I assume you mean ghosts and zombies, yes?”

Grimm smiles softly at the android’s curiosity. “Oh my, Alice, has Lord Zenarith finally drawn your attention? Yes, what I summoned earlier was a ghost. What originally drew me to Lord Zenarith was the promise of eternal youth as well as the promise of revenge preached in his teachings. How about it, Alice? Would you like to join?”

“No thanks, I’m an atheist. Hey, Six, we’ve got talk of ghosts, the universal standard bearer for supernatural mumbo jumbo. It’s a blatant challenge to my existence. After all, I stand at the pinnacle of science and technology. Ghosts...Hmph! Looks like we’ve got some

doesn't exist! But I'm out of magic for tonight. You can wait until tomorrow, can't you?"

"Ha! Did you hear that, Six? Common scammer's MO. Can't do what you request right then and there, but only after taking time to prepare. That gives her time to set up her various tricks."

"Grrrrrrrrrr!"

Snow looks at the two fighting like children and sighs.

"So Alice is a magic denier, mm? I've seen them from time to time, but never one so dedicated. I mean, my swords are magical, too..."

"Ah yes, your magic swords. I'd love to crack them open and see how they work. Invite me over to your house sometime. I'll take a few apart for analysis."

"Absolutely not!"

Ignoring the trio getting worked up over nonsense, Rose approaches me and tugs on my sleeve.

"Hey, Boss, I heard you beat a mokemoke. Did you bring any of it back? Maybe some of the meat...?"

As Rose asks in a needy whine, a question occurs to me.

"...Alice did bring some back. You're not going to start saying 'mokemoke' once you eat some, right?"

"...I don't think it'll be...a problem...maybe..."

There's no end to the mysteries of this planet's life-forms.

I think I'll hold off on giving Rose any mokemoke meat for now.

6

The day after our survey of the Cursed Forest.

"All right, Alice! I hope you're ready! You're going to regret blaspheming against Lord Zenarith!"

"Sure! I'll pick apart your superstitious garbage so badly you'll beg for mercy."

Why does this always happen?

"Hey, uh, why do I have to go, too? Can't you do this test without me...?"

"Don't be absurd, Commander! This is a challenge against Lord Zenarith himself! We need as many people as possible to witness a miracle by the gods to prevent more children like Alice coming into this world!"

"That's right, Six. This sort of thing requires irrefutable evidence. Otherwise they try to muddy the waters afterward."

.....

“The nerve! You impudent little brat! You’re going straight to hell after you die!”

“An android going to hell? That’s a new one.”

Ugh, seriously? I should’ve taken a page out of Rose and Snow’s book and ditched.

“Let’s be off! Luckily the moon is full tonight. I’ll conduct the ritual on the ridge. It’ll give us that much more magic to work with.”

“Ah, I see. So you went and set up your props on that ridge last night? Interesting.”

“Grrrrrrrrrrrrr!”

The sooner this is over, the better. I need a drink!

We arrive at a ridge a short distance from the city. If nothing else, the view from here is pretty sweet.

Grimm stands barefoot on the ground, spreading a sheet with a magic circle written on it. A creepy smile plays on her lips as she places a basket atop the magic circle. The basket’s covered with a cloth, obscuring the contents.

“Ah, tonight will be a special night indeed! I’ll make your shriveled little heart quake with fear! Ordinarily, the offering is food, but tonight, we’ll be using a live sacrifice! Behold! Within the basket is the poor, defenseless sacrifice I bought at the butcher’s shop...!”

Grimm calls out grandly, drawing back the cloth and revealing the basket’s contents...!

“...That’s adorable.”

“So fuzzy! Hey, Grimm, are you actually going to sacrifice this rabbit?”

Inside the basket is a single rabbit. Its ears are a little bigger than the ones on Earth have.

Apparently, she ordered a critter from the butcher, but forgot to check exactly what she bought until now.

“Kyu...”

The rabbit has its legs tied together inside the basket. It looks up at Grimm and me and squeaks softly.

Seeing it, Grimm swallows, then softly puts down the club in her hand...

“...C-Commander, tonight is a special night indeed! You’ll be assisting this ritual! When I give the signal, send that bunny to Lord Zenarith...”

“What?! No way! You’re the archbishop of a dark god! You can handle this yourself!”

I have no shortage of blood on my hands, but killing this adorable bunny over such a ridiculous spat is a bit further than I'm willing to go.

"Coward! Was all that boasting about belonging to an evil organization just empty bravado? Also, for your information, Lord Zenarith is *not* a dark god!"

"Sh-shut up! Don't mock Kisaragi! Evil minions have a conscience, too! Besides, if I could be that ruthless, I'd have been promoted ages ago!"

Just as Grimm and I are busily trying to shove responsibility for the rabbit onto each other...

"Kyu!"

With a small cry, the bunny collapses, lying there limply.

Alice holds the murder weapon in her hand, the club that Grimm had set down earlier...

"There, happy? Let's get on with it."

"You heartless..."

"Have you no conscience?!"

Grimm and I lecture Alice, who stands there coolly resting the club against her shoulder.

"Nope, not equipped with that. I'm an android, remember? Come on. Let's get started."

"S-stop! I'll do it! Just don't shove that into my face!" Although tears well up in her eyes, Grimm takes the rabbit Alice pushes toward her, softly setting it on the ground. Then she places a candle in front of the magic circle and lights it. "I've had enough mockery from this brat. It's time to show what an archbishop can really do..."

Grimm begins chanting. The magic circle begins to glow, and Grimm's expression lights up with joy.

"Hey, Alice? Are you sure this isn't a problem? Um, I'm actually pretty superstitious, and I have a bad feeling about this!"

"Calm down; it's just a glowing circle. She's probably just got LEDs embedded into the sheet."

Alice seems unfazed by all this, and she even tries to pick up the sheet to look for any lighting underneath. Meanwhile the magic circle's light grows in intensity—

"O Lord Zenarith, God of Undeath and Disaster! Upon thy name bring forth thy servant!"

With Grimm's elated cry, the magic circle shines even brighter...

Standing there is a monster that looks a lot like Gadalkand, one of the Demon Lord's Elite Four...

No, not a monster. A demon. A single, giant demon.

“You are quite the summoner, girl, summoning me to this world. It’s been centuries since I’ve tasted this air...”

The demon standing on the magic circle appears to waver like a mirage. I guess that means it’s only here in spirit at the moment.

“Wow, I’m impressed! You actually summoned something! And he looks pretty powerful!” I can’t help but praise her work.

Grimm stares at the summoned demon, tilting her head to the side. “Who are you...?”

“Hey!”

I grab Grimm by the arm and whisper into her ear, *“Just so we’re clear, you are the one that summoned that thing, right?”*

“Well, I’m not entirely sure. I was just trying to summon the undead. Ghosts, basically. I thought I’d summon an ancient evil spirit of some sort, but, well, this thing showed up instead...”

I try to ignore the fact that Grimm wanted to summon an ancient evil spirit and instead focus my concern on the demon standing in front of me.

Somehow, I get the feeling it won’t be amused if we tell it, “Sorry, we summoned you by accident.”

Just then...

Ignoring our hushed conversation, Alice stands in front of the demon, glancing a bit dismissively at its hideous face.

“Seriously, Grimm? This hologram is pretty sad.”

.....

“Hologram? What is a hologram, little one? I am a servant of the dark god Zenarith, the great demon— Hey! S-stop that!”

Just as the demon is about to introduce itself, Alice grabs the sheet with the magic circle, rustling it up and down.

Each time she waves the sheet, the demon wavers and lets out a loud cry, but Alice doesn’t seem the least bit perturbed by it.

“What are you doing, little one?! Such insolence after summoning me! This will not stand!”

“Oh, shut up, you holographic nobody. Where are you actually hiding?” the fearless android says breezily. This appears to impress the demon.

“Ah, so you’ve realized this form is only temporary. For me to fully manifest in this world, the rabbit is much too small a sacrifice.”

The demon’s form ripples in the air as Alice continues to maintain her hold on the sheet—

“If you wish to see my true form, provide more sacrifices! Then provide your soul as payment and cry out your heart’s desire! Now, little one... Hey! Stop that! What are you doing? Why do you interrupt me?!”

The demon appears to panic as Alice tries to roll up the sheet for storage.

“I asked for a ghost. I don’t need an imitation Gadalkand.”

“Imitation?! You *dare* call me an imitation?!”

Even as Alice continues to taunt the demon, an idea comes to me.

“Hey, if you’re a demon, does that mean you can grant three wishes?”

“Commander! I know it sounds odd coming from me, given I have a contract with Lord Zenarith, but you really don’t want to sign a contract with a demon!”

At my question, the demon finally appears to notice our presence.

“That’s correct, little one. I will grant any wish you ask in exchange for your soul. Now, do you desir— Stop it already! I can’t leave until we close the deal!”

Alice turns over the sheet, as if hoping to find something installed on the other side.

“You, the child that keeps doing these odd things. I’ll grant your wishes first. I’ll take a suitable payment, but I’ll grant anything you wish.”

“All right, then, make a couple of habitable planets around Earth’s star. Same amount of resources as Earth. But use the atmosphere from about fifty years ago, back before all the pollution.”

“Your wish will be gra— Um... What? Earth? Planet?”

The demon goes silent for a moment when it realizes the scope of the android’s demands.

“P-planets? Are you mad?! You just asked me to create two or three worlds! Just how greedy are you?!”

The demon practically screams the words.

“You’re the one who said ‘anything.’ It’s not like I’m trying to take advantage of a loophole by asking for more wishes. Fine. Then solve our energy crisis at least. Give us an infinite energy source that’s clean and compact.”

“Ener— Wh-what? Could you explain it in simpler terms? Can’t you just wish for money or gems? Maybe ask for power or a curse on someone you hate...”

It appears the demon doesn’t understand what energy is and proposes some alternatives.

“I’ve got plenty of money and power. All right, how about you wipe out all hostile life on this planet. The Demon Lord, the barbarians, also the mokemokes and giant monsters...”

“That’s a massacre of untold proportions! N-no, I can’t grant a wish that could bring about global disaster all for a single soul!”

The demon appears to be at a loss, unsure how to handle the android’s extreme wishes.

Feeling a little sympathy for it, I turn to Alice.

“Hey, just let that thing go home...”

“He’s the one who said he can’t leave without granting wishes. Still, thinking about wishes this thing might grant... Oh, the hideout’s toilet was backed up. Maybe we can get it to fix that.”

The demon realizes Alice isn’t kidding about the plumbing and some panic creeps into its expression.

But then it suddenly looks up, as if realizing something.

“...I—I know. Youth! How about eternal youth, like any woman would desire...?!”

“Androids don’t age. Version upgrades can deal with age-related degradation. This is a waste of time. Just get out of here.”

“.....”

The demon, now completely deflated and looking down, disappears without a word. Compared to its flashy entrance and attitude, it’s a bit anticlimactic.

The silence that remains afterward is deafening.

To try to break up this weird tension, I mutter, “...I wanted to wish for debauchery.”

“Once you become a Supreme Leader you can secure that on your own. Don’t get sucked into a shady cult like that.”

...Guess I need to try harder, starting tomorrow. At Alice’s words, I swear to myself I’ll redouble my efforts here on this planet—!

“So, Alice. Do you believe me now?”

“.....”

[Status Report]

Conducted surveys on this planet's life-forms and magic.

This planet has many large life-forms, and almost all of them are aggressive and combative.

The strike from a supopocchi is particularly deadly, claiming the lives of several hunters each year.

The supopocchi's predator, the mokemoke, is a relatively tame creature, and we believe coexistence with it is possible. It appears to recognize other mokemokes through its distinct cry, and if approached honestly will answer in kind.

Concerning magic, Alice is still skeptical about its existence and believes we must conduct additional studies.

We have discovered that the entities known as demons are not particularly impressive.

However, we believe additional research is needed and will be conducting another summoning ritual during the next full moon.

Will follow up with an additional report at that time.

Reporting Operative:

Combat Agent 6, Mokemoke Fan





1

Because this country's king is, in a word, useless, the king's oldest daughter, Princess Tillis is the one actually running the government.

After receiving summons from the de facto ruler of this kingdom, I make my way to the castle. Once there I head toward the courtyard where I see...

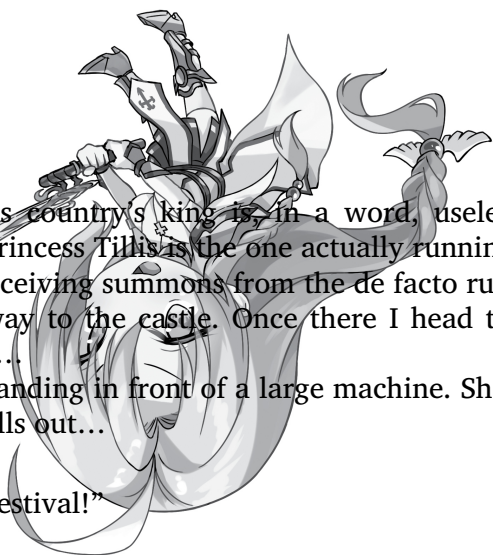
Tillis standing in front of a large machine. She suddenly opens her eyes and calls out...

“Dick Festival!”

.....

“As I suspected, it won't activate...but I also can't very well recite that in front of my subjects...,” Tillis mutters with a sigh. She freezes when she turns around and sees me standing there.

I look to the motionless Tillis and speak up. “Even a princess needs to unwind from time to time. When I'm on a campaign, I sometimes strip naked in my hotel room to enjoy the sense of freedom, for example.”



DICK

FESTIVAL!

“Um, no. I’d rather you not draw odd conclusions in your mind! And to be clear, the responsibility for my utterance rests squarely at your feet.”

I suppose Tillis is a little embarrassed at being caught; she flings some unfair accusations in my direction.

“What are you talking about? How the hell is it my fault?”

“You’re not serious, are you?! You do recall you were the one who changed the artifact’s holy incantation to this statement, yes?”

...The hell is she talking about?

“Why would I use such a stupid password? You’re not making any sense.”

“Surely you jest! It wasn’t that long ago, you know! Have you actually forgotten...?! R-regardless, that’s not why I called you here today. I have something I wish to discuss with you, Sir Six.”

It seems my recent heroics have unlocked the Princess route. Unfortunately...

“I’m sorry, Tillis. I’m flattered that you like me, but you’re a little too...devious for my tastes.”

“Just where did you get that idea?! I only wished to discuss a matter with you! Also, please don’t call me devious! I was hoping to talk to you about this artifact!” Tillis bristles at my remark, her cheeks still faintly flushed.

“That machine makes it rain, right?”

Tillis nods once in response. “In the past, we would activate the artifact each year during the dry season. Unfortunately, the artifact’s malfunctions have made that difficult as of late...,” she says with a serious expression. “Now, for the reason you’re here. I’d like to hire you for an escort mission. With the artifact broken, we had been relying on water crystals mined in the neighboring kingdom of Toris... With the artifact back in working condition, we thought to reduce our order of crystals. Unfortunately...” She looks away, her lips turning into a frown. “Father decided at the last minute he didn’t want to go through with the activation ritual. We haven’t been able to find him...”

According to Tillis, the artifact can only be activated when a member of the royal family says the holy incantation in front of a large crowd of praying subjects.

Wait—in that case, it doesn’t have to be the king, does it...?

“So why don’t you do it?”

“Surely you don’t expect a maiden to say such words in public...! C-currently, I have parties searching for Father, but as a precaution, we’ll be sending a diplomat to Toris. Given that we were the ones who requested a reduction in the shipments, it’s likely to be a challenge to

get them to send us additional crystals...”

Tillis folds her hands together as if in prayer and gazes up at me with the expression of a frail, vulnerable maiden.

But it doesn't fool me.

Damn, this princess is a schemer. I'm sure she's about to propose something ruthless.

“...The crown prince of Toris is known for being quite a womanizer. So I intend to send Snow as a diplomat. If one can ignore her personality flaws, she's quite beautiful...”

“I really don't want to hear the rest.”

So this princess is going to sacrifice one of her vassals to a whoremongering prince.

It's the sort of thing that makes even me, an evil minion, wince.

“Please listen to what I'm actually saying. I said I'd like to hire you as an escort. I'm not planning to sell her. The prince, given his ways, is likely to start planning untoward things once he sees Snow. When he makes a move on her, catch him in the act and use that as leverage. Trying to seduce a diplomat is an enormous diplomatic faux pas. It would provide us with a much-needed advantage during negotiations.”

“Back home we call that a honeypot.”

Seriously, what's wrong with the people I know? Can't trust a single one of them...

Despite my revulsion, Tillis appears to be impressed with me.

“Ah, so you mean to say this is an established diplomatic strategy in your country, Sir Six? Then that makes this easy. Snow is a strong woman, so she should be fine. She survived having you remove her underwear in public, after all.”

“Tillis, there was a reason for that, remember? *Sigh*. There are all sorts of weird rumors about me circulating around town. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't add to them.”

I mean, the only reason I pulled down Snow's panties was to save this country. It was a heroic act, not sexual harassment.

Still...

“Escort, huh...? I'm a Combat Agent, not a bodyguard. This isn't really in my wheelhouse...”

As I grumble, Tillis seems to find something amusing and smiles. “Are you sure you want to say that? I've heard you and Snow have kissed. Would you really be all right losing her to another man?” She smiles at me teasingly.

“Hmm? Sure I would.”

“Um...” Tillis sounds surprised at my answer.

“Short-tempered, greedy women like her aren't my type. So doesn't really bother me if someone else takes her...”

“Please don’t say that in front of her! Anyway, this is a formal request to Kisaragi from this kingdom. Please accept it!”

I’m still really lukewarm on the idea...

“Ordinarily, the chief of staff would handle negotiations with Toris. Unfortunately, he suddenly resigned a month ago... So we’re currently rather shorthanded when it comes to diplomats.”

The chief of staff, huh? Don’t know who that is, but what an irresponsible jerk. I guess he must’ve been really mistreated by this kingdom.

“Well, whatever the case, I’m afraid I’m going to have to turn down this assignment. I’m a Combat agent, not a babysitter. I can’t really do anything but fight. I mean, I do love entrapping people, but I’d rather you asked someone else to handle this one.”

Tillis appears caught off guard by the rejection. Her tone becomes hurried and somewhat desperate. “P-please, would you reconsider? I’ve actually prepared some information requested by Miss Alice as part of your payment...”

“...Information?”

What sort of information would she want? Is she looking for rare life-forms or poisons from this planet?

As if to answer my question, Tillis continues. “Yes, the information concerning the ruins scattered around this continent. In fact, Toris, the kingdom where we’re sending Snow, has an unexplored ruin. Evidently, it remains untouched, as they can’t find a way to break its seal. If you accept our request, we’ll ask Toris to permit you to explore those ruins... Does that sound acceptable?”

Tillis coyly looks up at me.

2

On the outskirts of the city there’s a largish house with a sign labeled THE KISARAGI CORPORATION.

This is the temporary hideout Alice and I are renting.

For now, it’s the location of the Kisaragi Corporation Grace Kingdom branch.

“—So basically, there’s an unexplored ruin in that kingdom. They haven’t been able to figure out the ancient technology used to seal it, so they haven’t been inside. We can always worry about that when we get there.”

I’m discussing the details of the job with Alice.

“Ancient technology—like that anomalous artifact in the castle

courtyard—if it's just locked with an electronic key, you can leave it to me. The problem is the other job from Tillis."

"...Hmm? The other assignment?" I dangle my legs while sitting on the edge of the table.

"You're being asked to escort Snow on a diplomatic mission, right? I'm going to say this now—try to avoid doing anything stupid this time, will you? I may have high specs, but there's a limit to what I can bail you out of."

Kind of an odd thing for Alice to say. Is she worried about me?

"Oh, about that. I can handle it. I'm good at making friends over drinks."

"I wish you'd stop dragging random geezers home when you go out drinking. One of the homeless guys tried to set up a camp in the hideout's backyard. Getting rid of him was a chore and a half."

Oh, so that's why they were never around in the morning. I always thought it was weird that my new buddies would be missing the next day.

"Well, I'm impressed Miss Android. Not an ounce of compassion in your heart for bunnies being sacrificed or homeless drunks, mm?"

"I've told you before, but I don't *have* a heart. Anyway, remember that Astaroth ordered us to expand our territory. Not to repeat myself, but don't do anything stupid. We need to produce results by the end of this month."

Alice hammers her warning home.

"I don't know what those Supreme Leaders told you, but you've got the wrong idea about me. Just watch. The longest-serving Combat Agent is also an able diplomat. You'll see for yourself!"

"Get it through your head. Don't do anything you don't have to do."

3

Most of this planet is covered in a giant forest.

The remaining land is a reddish-brown wasteland, completely unsuitable for human habitation.

Currently we're in the middle of said wasteland—

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! We're going so fast! We've become the wind itself! Commander! Look over there! Those Deadly Hegggs are like purple-orange lady snails! Nothing can catch us

now!”

“Hey, Grimm, calm down or you’re going to fall out! Snow, Rose! Don’t just sit there, stop her!”

We’re in the middle of said wasteland, zooming along on a giant buggy with Grimm excitedly leaning out the open sunroof. Due to some unfortunate taunting, the buggy’s being chased by a mob of those four-legged monstrosities.

I don’t know what Grimm’s so excited about, but she’s been in a fine mood, standing up and leaning out the sunroof, laughing in delight.

In the back seat, Snow and Rose, perhaps in awe at their first car ride, are glued to the windows, watching the red land speed past.

“Alice? Don’t go too fast. If we hit a bump, Grimm’s gonna go flying... Wait, hey! Your feet don’t even reach the pedals!”

“I’m a high-spec android. If it’s a machine, I only need a connector to control it.”

I look over at Alice, and sure enough, stretching from beneath her clothes is a cord connected to the steering column.

“The road gets rough from here on out. You should probably drag Grimm back inside.”

Right as Alice issues her warning, we hit a large bump, and the whole vehicle is briefly airborne.

At the same time, the laughter from the sunroof stops...

“B-Boss! Grimm fell out! Uh-oh! The Deadly Heggs are after her! It looks bad!”

“I told you so!”

Alice slams on the brakes while the rest of us jump out of the buggy.

Grimm has passed out from the impact when she flew out of the vehicle. The mob of monsters are dragging her back to their nest.

“Hey, put her down! That spinster’s not very tasty, I promise! I’ll give you this instead! Go on home!”

I throw some rations out as bait. The monsters abandon Grimm, flocking to the food instead. I don’t think they understood what I said, but I guess it’s pretty obvious which is tastier.

We pick up the walking time bomb, and the Deadly Heggs, perhaps satisfied at getting a little payback, leave us alone.

“...Can we do something about the fact that she’s disabled before every battle?”

“She’s still alive. They were just gnawing on her here and there. She’ll be fine.”

Grimm slumps in her seat, eyes rolled up in her head, as we continue our journey by buggy.

“Hey, Six. What say you let me have that magic item? What was it called? A buggy? I know someone who’s good at flipping rare items for a good price. I’ll deal with selling it for the low, low price of a five percent commiss—”

“Nope! You lot aren’t ready for that level of technology. Besides, ordering one takes a load of Evil Points.”

After leaving the kingdom of Grace in the early morning, we’ve arrived at the neighboring kingdom of Toris around dusk.

“Evil Points? You mentioned something about not having enough points when fighting the Demon Lord’s Army. Does the summoning magic you and Alice perform work on some sort of point system?”

We’re not actually using magic to get our equipment, but evidently that’s what it looks like to the locals.

“Yep, more or less. Evil Points are something I earn on a day-to-day basis. It’s more or less my ace in the hole, so I try to save it for emergencies.”

“I don’t quite understand, but I guess it means we get rare magic items if we stick with you, right...? Hey, Six, can you order swords like Tiger Man? Depending on the quality, I wouldn’t mind paying you with my body...”

“Um...”

Apparently she’s totally fine with selling her body in exchange for money or swords.

I heard she was from the slums, but just what sort of life did she live to end up like this?

And to think she was blushing over a kiss she gave me as a reward the other day.

Arriving in Toris, we park the buggy at the city gate and head to the castle.

Rose, carrying the unconscious Grimm and looking around, appears to have spotted something of interest.

“Boss! Look at that! They’re selling Andrew Skewers. I wonder what sort of monster Andrew is?”

Rose points toward a stall selling meat skewers.

“Andrew is a giant magical beast that threatened this kingdom around ten years ago. Despite it being dead for over ten years, the meat is still flavorful and delicious. It was such a gigantic beast that they’ve been able to eat it for the last decade.”

“Wow! You sure know a lot, Boss!”

As I fill Rose’s head with nonsense, the owner of the stall interrupts.

“C’mon now, don’t be spreading weird rumors like that! My name’s Andrew. Andrew Skewers just means skewers from Andrew’s

shop.”

“Boss! You lied to me! It’s just as grandpa said! Humans are treacherous creatures that should be wiped off the face of the planet!”

I ignore Rose’s embarrassed slapping and survey the city.

At a glance, Toris’s tech level seems to be about the same as Grace’s. There’s the occasional mystery machine (aka artifact), but for now it seems Kisaragi’s technology is better.

As we stroll along, the castle comes into view.

It appears someone alerted them to our presence, and as we approach the main gate, a well-dressed man greets us.

“Representatives of the kingdom of Grace, I bid you welcome to Toris! I’m afraid your timing makes an immediate audience with His Majesty impossible, but we have prepared a feast to ease the aches from your travels. Your host for the evening will be His Highness, the Crown Prince Engel. Please enjoy yourselves.”

The older gentleman, probably a bureaucrat of one sort or another, greets us with a formal bow.

I’m weighing how to respond when Snow steps in front of our group.

“Thank you; glad to be here! My name is Snow, captain of the Royal Guard and personal knight to Princess Tillis. I suppose you could say I’m Her Highness’s right hand.”

I openly gawk at her through her spiel, but she continues with a wide smile on her face.

“I’ve heard that the export of water crystals is the main industry for Toris. Not only that, but those rare crystals are buried abundantly beneath the soil. I’ve never seen a water crystal, but I sure would love to. I’m quite envious that they’re so abundant here!”

“I—I see. Well then, we can provide you a few water crystals as a little token of our esteem. If you could please give our regards to Princess Tillis.”

I can’t believe this. She’s just soliciting bribes.

“Of course! I’ll let Her Highness know that we were given a wonderful welcome here in Toris! Ah, that reminds me. Our mode of transportation is most convenient, indeed! It can carry quite a bit of cargo, much more than just a small amount...”

We stare at Snow, completely repulsed by her attitude as she enters the castle, chatting up the official.

“...Hey, Alice,” I say. “Do you really think she can handle being a diplomat? We’re here as her escort. If she screws up, we’ll probably get in trouble, too. Not to mention, even I’m turned off by her naked greed.”

“Despite appearances, she was a knight captain. I’m sure this isn’t her first time serving as a diplomat. Bribes are pretty common in

backward places like this. Isn't that true, Rose?"

"Grandpa was right. Humans are avaricious vermin that need to be extinguished..."

...I glance at Rose muttering darkly beside us, following Snow as she cheerfully strolls through the castle.

4

Time for our welcome party.

"Commander, what do you think about this super-mini dress? Sexy, right? Super sexy? Does it make you want to shove me against the wall and ravage me?"

I run into Grimm in front of the banquet hall. She shows off the sexy black dress she's wearing.

"You need to consider your age when picking a dress."

"O Great Lord Zenarith, I beseech thee! Deliver disaster unto this man! Be cursed with impotence!"

As Grimm points her finger, I dodge by diving out of the way.

"Missed..."

"How can you sound so casual about this? Are you crazy?! That might be the most terrifying thing I've ever experienced!"

The ring on Grimm's finger vanishes, taken by the dark god as payment for the curse.

This damn spinster. She can't bring herself to be remotely useful most of the time, but somehow wields terrifying powers at times like this.

She can cast curses by sacrificing items with sentimental value.

I'm told the success rate goes down if the feedback effects of the curse don't actually harm her. Still, that was a terrifying curse.

"It's because you're being a tease, Commander. You peeked up my skirt once..."

"That was because you were taunting me. Also, if you're going to twirl around in a skirt like that, I'll go peeking again!"

As if on guard at my statement, Grimm slowly backs away from me.

At that moment, the other three join us as they finish their preparations.

Snow's wearing a low-cut dress that doesn't leave a lot to the imagination. She proudly puffs out her chest. "Six, what do you think

of this dress? Is it sexy? It's super sexy, right? Does it make you horny and want to buy me things?"

At that eerily familiar line, I turn to look at Grimm, who glances down in embarrassment.

"...Grimm, this is what you looked like a few minutes ago."

"...I'm sorry, Commander. I got flustered because I heard there was going to be a party. I'll be careful."

Alice, wearing a normal dress that isn't very different from her usual outfit, comes up to me and whispers, "*Hey, Six, I wandered a bit around the castle, pretending to be lost. This country's got its share of weirdly advanced technology. There were too many people around, so I couldn't look too closely, but I'll go mess around with some of it while everyone's busy with the party.*"

"I gotta hand it to you, Alice. You sure are thorough..."

It seems this planet is littered with mysterious technology. I wonder what it is that happened here in the past.

The ancient ruins are supposedly still unexplored. I bet if I find some great treasure or super items, I can leverage that into becoming a Supreme Leader...

Speaking of ruins, the Chimera that's probably related to them is humming happily to herself, dressed in a pretty little dress.

...Is she looking forward to meeting someone here, too...?

"Rose? You too...?"

"What do you mean, Boss? Isn't this exciting? I'm sure there'll be lots of delicious food!"

Oh. My bad. She's just excited about the food. *Thanks, Rose. Don't ever change.*

I silently pray for Rose's future as she looks at me with a puzzled expression.

I straighten the collar on my borrowed suit and open the doors to the banquet hall.

"How do we get out of this, Six? This is starting to look like a miscalculation of epic proportions."

The situation in the banquet hall has devolved into complete chaos.

Credit for this belongs entirely to the members of my squadron.

"Oh my! I must say that's impressive, Sir Harmel. Especially for someone so young! And as the third son of a noble family, you're insulated from all that inheritance nonsense, and you are even spared the responsibility of caring for your family in their dotage."

"U-uh, yes, that's right. But my subordinates deserve credit. I wouldn't have become captain of the Seventh Company without

them...”

The spinster’s speaking in a voice an octave higher than usual, using words I didn’t know she had in her vocabulary. She’s standing next to a good-looking brunette knight, batting her lashes at him. Dressed up like this, Grimm looks like a proper lady, without a trace of her usual paleness to be seen.

“Um, may I ask why you’re barefoot, miss?”

Well, a proper lady if you ignore her bare feet.

She mentioned it before, something about a curse that prevented her from wearing shoes. She stands out as an oddity, wandering barefoot around the carpeted banquet hall while dressed in a pretty black dress.

“Oh, Harmel, please call me Grimm. No need to be so formal.”

Grimm appears to be doing her best to work her way into the knight’s good graces, twisting this way and that, but he doesn’t seem to be buying what she’s selling.

“I—I can’t very well call a woman I just met by her first name... Um. Should I refrain from asking why you are barefoot?”

“Religious purposes, I’m afraid. Anyway, Harmel, you seem a little shy! But that’s lovely in its own way. It keeps you faithful, I’m sure!” Grimm answers her partner’s questions rather aggressively.

The knight seems at a loss at her aggressive approach, unable to flat out avoid her given her status.

Still...

“Wow, this is delicious! I’ve never had meat this delicious before! And never this much at once!”

“I—I’m very glad to hear it. Still, Miss Rose, ordinarily people don’t eat an entire roast pig by themselves... Ah, perhaps you should leave the bones? And there’s sauce all over your face...”

Munching on a whole roast pig served on a giant platter, Rose is crying tears of joy at the meal before her.

The serving maid fails in her efforts to keep Rose’s face clean as the Chimera continues to aggressively devour the roast pig.

“Good! So good!! The bones are nice and crunchy! Every part of this is delicious!”

“I’m glad to hear it... I’m pleased that you’re so happy, Miss Rose. Please try the charcoal-grilled romare shrimp and echigo crab next. It may smell very strongly of the sea, but there is a lot of flavor in...”

Miss Rose, please leave the shells. Miss Rose? Miss Rose! It's best not to eat the pincers...!"

It may not be in the same way as Grimm, but Rose is drawing her share of attention.

And then there's...

"Where is Prince Engel?! I heard the crown prince would be welcoming me tonight. Hey, Six! If I succeed in seducing the prince, I'll reward you, too. So do whatever you can to support my efforts!"

"When you're that honest about your intentions, it's almost refreshing..."

She's not even trying to hide her greed now.

The dress looks great on her, but the ugliness of her words completely spoils her beauty.

"Listen closely, Six. The man's the crown prince of Toris and the next king. And this kingdom is so rich in resources that it's said you can dig gold coins out of the ground. Basically, if I can become the royal consort, that's a guaranteed life of luxury!"

What am I gonna do with this chick?

Tillis wants me to run a honeypot sting, but that requires actually stepping in when things get too hot and heavy.

But seeing how eager Snow is to go all the way, all I'd be is an awkward interruption.

Noticing that Snow seemed to be getting a bit hot and bothered by talk about the prince, Alice approaches me and whispers in my ear, *"Hey, Six. I've heard this kingdom's Prince Engel is a fat slob of a womanizer. Not a good catch at all. You should lower her expectations a bit. Do something about her, will you?"*

Ah, I see. "I dunno; it sounds kind of entertaining, actually. Let's see what happens when we get her hopes up. I can't wait to see the look on her face when she meets him."

"You really do have the personality for this evil minion stuff...", Alice says with an expression I can only describe as "tasteful."

One of the household attendants announces grandly, "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for waiting. His Highness, the Crown Prince Engel has arrived!"

The man standing in the entrance blows my expectations clear out of the water.

"...Alice, wow. That's even worse than I thought. When I heard 'fat prince,' I was imagining someone young. Like, a pudgy spoiled brat. Not...well...*that*."

"I hear the king's still got his wits about him here. Doesn't matter how old you get. You stay a prince if your parents are still alive and kicking."

The man entering the room is fat, greasy, and well past forty. He's

like the poster child for an unhealthy lifestyle. Just walking gets him winded, and despite the pleasant temperature, he's dripping with sweat.

I can't help but feel sorry for Snow. Motives aside, this has to be quite a letdown for her. I turn to her to offer my condolences.

"Prince Engel! A pleasure to meet you. I am Snow, knight captain of the Royal Guard from the kingdom of Grace. I'm honored to make your acquaintance today."

Thinking she'd be in shock after seeing the prince, I find a Snow with glittering eyes and a beatific smile.

...Looks like I underestimated her.

"Ah, I see your kingdom has sent one of their most beautiful as a diplomat. I am Engel, crown prince of this kingdom. Thank you for making the long journey to—"

"Beautiful? You flatter me, Your Highness! You are, yourself, blessed with an impressive physique and rugged features! I feel faint in your presence." Snow piles on the flattery even before Engel finishes speaking.

I thought she was just a slightly greedy sword fanatic. Boy, was I wrong. There's no doubt in my mind that she could love an orc or a slime as long as they've got enough money.

"...Lady Snow, I appreciate compliments as much as the next man, but I'm well aware of my own appearance. There is no need to flatter me, our kingdoms remain steadfast allies regardless of—"

"Do not be absurd, Your Highness! Gaze into my eyes, and you will see the truth! You are a fine specimen of a man. I can guarantee that! Do you see anything but the truth in my gaze?"

The silver-haired beauty gazes intently into the fat prince's face without so much as blinking.

If you just looked at this scene and heard the lines without context, it's actually kind of touching. Something straight out of "Beauty and the Beast." But I know better. How the hell am I supposed to deal with her?

"...Y-you're right. I see no hint of deception in your eyes. You have my thanks. No one has ever provided me with such a heartfelt compliment. I envy Princess Tillis for having such wonderful vassals. Now, I believe you have come to our kingdom to secure more water crystals..."

"Have I done something to offend you, Your Highness? Brushing aside my efforts at courtship for such talk?"

The gold digger is so intent on landing her catch that she interrupts the prince's effort to get the conversation back on track.

Such talk indeed. It's like she's forgotten that's the whole reason we made the trip.

“L-Lady Snow, putting your remark to one side, surely you understand seducing an ally’s emissary would become an enormous diplomatic scandal...” The prince backs up nervously, evidently caught off guard by Snow’s misplaced anger.

“How disappointing! I had heard you were quite the womanizer, Your Highness. It appears your reputation is exaggerated. Do you mean to embarrass me so in public, Your Highness?”

“Do you not consider it disrespectful to describe a man you just met as a womanizer? And to his face at that? Indeed, why are you so aggressive when we’ve only just met?”

Snow makes no effort at concealing her greed as she sidles closer to the prince, who continues to back away from her.

“I’m here on Princess Tillis’s behalf. Surely you understand what that means. Our kingdom has been the target of invasion attempts by the Demon Lord’s Army, but just recently we repelled a major invasion. We now only have the occasional skirmish against the demonic forces. Do you see the man over there? The one with drink in hand and staring about like a half-witted yokel? He’s called Agent Six. He may not look like much, but he’s quite capable in a fight.” Snow glances briefly toward me, speaking in a voice loud enough that I hear every word from where I’m standing.

“Hey, Alice. She’s insulting me now.”

“Eh, she did say you’re quite capable in a fight. She’s complimenting you.”

I don’t really find that very convincing. It’s at best a backhanded compliment...

“Currently, our kingdom employs a large number of similar mercenaries. And these mercenaries are as savage as their brutish looks suggest. However, if we give them an enemy to fight, they’re easy to keep leashed.”

The prince casts a worried glance in my direction.

Even I can tell that she’s not complimenting me.

Snow wears an evil grin as a threat lurks behind her words. “Certainly, we’re currently in a staring match with the Demon Lord’s Army, but I have no doubt that the war will heat up again soon. However...it’s important we maintain good relations with our neighbors, if only to keep these barbarians in check.”

“O-of course! Hence our lavish welcome, Lady Snow...”

...I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that exchange.

Just then.

“How dare you! You should have told me you were engaged! Being a hunk doesn’t mean you get to toy with a maiden’s heart!”

“B-but th-that’s ridiculous...! Please calm down, Miss Grimm! We’re drawing everyone’s attention!”

I hear angry shouting coming from right smack in the middle of the hall.

When I look over to see what’s going on, I catch our squadron’s spinster trying to curse the knight from earlier.

“O Great Lord Zenarith, I beseech thee! Deliver disaster unto this man! Be drenched in water!”

Something in Grimm’s hands vanishes in a flash of light, just as water drenches her as though someone had emptied a bucket over her head.

...Looks like her curse misfired.

The thoroughly soggy Grimm slumps, gazing down at the ground and trembling.

“...Heh...Heh-heh-heh... Laugh! Ha-ha-ha! Laugh at this pathetic woman! Laugh at the woman dumped by the handsome knight! Laugh at the woman who then couldn’t even get a curse right! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. Laugh at me!”

The spinster flops onto the carpeted floor, rolling back and forth in a temper tantrum. I try not to think about the fact that she’s one of my subordinates...

This is really hard to watch, so I turn to leave. At which point...

“Please, young lady, don’t be so hard on yourself. The soaked dress and tears are spoiling your beauty. I’ll have the maids prepare a fresh set of clothes for you...”

As Grimm throws a tantrum, a tall middle-aged gentleman approaches her and lends his handkerchief. He then offers her a hand to help her stand.

He’s built pretty ruggedly. He’s probably a general or something along those lines.

“...Th-thank you, sir. M-may I have your name...?”

“First, allow me to warn you that I’m married, with children.”

I can’t stand to keep watching. I walk up to Alice, who has been keenly observing Grimm, and poke her shoulder. Then I quickly make my way out of the room.

my achievements would trigger all sorts of romance flags among me and my squad mates. So what the hell? Does everyone just want a rich, handsome guy? Here I am on an alien world, and I still can't escape the harsh sting of reality."

"You're pretty greedy yourself, wanting someone young, well-endowed, beautiful, and faithful in the same package. As an android, I have to say men and women are both useless. If you want the ideal partner, I'd say you're better off sticking to the R-rated androids Kisaragi will be selling soon."

Alice and I wander around the castle as I try to cool off from the flush of warmth brought on by the alcohol...

"...Wait, run that by me again? Kisaragi's going to be selling R-rated, pervy, pretty-girl androids? "

"I never said anything about them being pervy."

Shit. Now I just want to go back to Earth. But if I go back now, I'll definitely get tossed into a war zone full of Heroes...

As I'm pondering all this, Alice suddenly stops in her tracks. "We're here. Six, what do you think this is?"

Sitting here in the corner of the castle is a strange device with a large glass case attached in the middle. The case is filled with some sort of liquid, and the machine appears to be working.

"I know what it is. It's one of those pods you use to grow things. Specifically, pretty-girl homunculi and human clones. Alice, figure out how this works and make a clone of Snow. Then we can take the new, pure Snow and replace the corrupt one in the banquet hall."

"That sounds pretty entertaining, but this looks more like a hibernation capsule. Probably used to keep something in suspended animation. Based on the fact that it's empty, though, it seems whatever was inside woke up and ran off," Alice observes as she surveys the device, touching it here and there.

"Nah, I don't think so. This has to be a device to create beautiful women. I mean, why else would it be sitting here like this? I bet if we mess around with it, it'll spit out something like a gumball machine."

"Well, if you're that certain, give it a try. But the design's more like a life-support device than anything else."

Undeterred by Alice's remarks, I start randomly messing with the machine.

I eventually lose patience as all my efforts don't even get me a single beep. Alice lets out an exasperated sigh at my irritation.

"I bet it's broken from sitting here for hundreds of years," I tell her. "Usually these things start working if you smack them."

"Whatever; if that's what it takes to satisfy your curiosity. If you break it, we're getting the hell out of here. So be ready to run."

I listen to Alice's words with half an ear as I approach the device

and cock my fist back to strike. Just then—

“STOP!”

—a yell that sounds rather like a scream echoes through the dark hallway.

I turn around to find the source of the commotion...

“You idiots. What are you doing?! Do you know how important this device is?”

The voice belongs to a young man—a boy, probably still in elementary school. He’s a little mouthy, but he is handsome, especially in his face. A mop of silver hair and a different-colored iris in each eye round out the look.

...I could swear I’ve seen someone like him before.

“What do you want, you brat? You some sort of custodian? I’m Mr. Six, an important envoy from the kingdom of Grace. You should watch your tone if you want to avoid a diplomatic incident.”

“I’m not involved with this country. Wait, did you just say...you’re Six? You...? Huh, Gadalkand lost to *you*? Guess he was all talk after all.”

...What’s with this brat? Think I need to teach him some manners.

—Wait, what did he just say?

“Gadalkand? That’s the name of the Elite Four member I hacked to pieces, right? Didn’t think a dumb brat like you would know something like that.”

The boy snorts derisively. “Oh, I see. I guess Heine was right. You’re a little lacking in the brains department. My name is Russell. One of the Demon Lord’s Elite Four, Russell of the Water.”

A daring smile plays across his lips.

A moment later, his smile is replaced by a look of discomfort and a cry of pain as his face is subjected to my iron grip.

“...Hey! What’s wrong, Russell? The hell is going...? Gah! Y-you?!”

As I’m punishing the child claiming to be an overlord in the Demon Lord’s Army, I hear a familiar voice call out from behind me.

I turn around to face the voice—

“Target apprehended!”

“Gaaaah! What?! Wait...!”

Standing there is the unmistakable figure of the Elite Four member, Heine of the Flames.

I don't know what she's doing here, but I toss Russell aside and tackle Heine as she stands frozen in shock.

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don't know why you're here, but you shouldn't have let your guard down! Alice, get them to send us some handcuffs!"

"On it!"

"Stop! Hey, Six! You've got the wrong idea! I'm not your enemy today! I'm not here to wipe out humanity or anything! I'm here as an envoy from the Demon Lord!"

Heine lets out a desperate cry as I pin her to the floor.

"Six, the handcuffs are here."

"Good work, Alice! Go ahead and lock her up once I hold her arms behind her!"

"Wait... Listen...!"

I keep Heine pinned to the floor, grabbing her arms and dragging them behind her back.

"Six, she's cuffed. You can let go now."

"Dammit, listen to me...! H-hey, Six! I'm restrained now. You can let go of me. H-hey, why are you breathing so heavily? Russell! Russell! HELP!!"

I flip around in place, holding Heine in front of me like a shield.

"Guh?! R-Russell... Y-you...!"

"Heine?! N-no, I was just trying to help...!"

Sensing danger from behind me, I shielded myself from Russell's attack with Heine, and Heine took his spell in the back.

Her features twist into a pained grimace.

"You brat! The hell are you doing, attacking someone you just met?! How awful!"

"That's impressive, Six. Forgetting your own actions from just three minutes ago."

I don't understand what Alice is getting at, but I stand, keeping Heine positioned as a shield.

I stay hidden behind her as I slowly approach Russell. His face has gone pale from the shock of accidentally hurting an ally.

"Hey, Heine. Just because you're a villain doesn't mean you can't choose your allies more carefully. Not only did this brat attack someone he just met from behind, but he totally did so knowing he might hurt you. Such a ruthless savage!"

"Six, you really should look in a mirror... You know what? Never mind, I'm done."

As I try to comfort Heine, Alice interjects with another odd comment from the side.

"Well, either way. We came to a foreign castle and captured a pervy Elite Four member. Not only do I get the credit, but I get to

enjoy a little aggressive interrogation time. Hee-hee-hee. I'm sure you're well aware of what happens to female leaders that get captured by the enemy, hmm?"

"S-S-Six, w-wait...! We really aren't here as enemies... And your hands keep touching my chest...!"

Each time Heine tries to squirm away, I'm told by a voice in my mind that I've acquired more Evil Points.

"Nice work, Six. You may as well go full scumbag now. Show me what it means to be a petty, conniving little rat!"

Ignoring both the teary-eyed Heine and the obnoxiously commenting Alice, I turn my attention to Russell.

"So just what are you exactly? Is the Demon Lord's Army so starved for talent that they'd make a petty, conniving brat like you into an overlord?"

"Wh-what the hell are you going on about?! Calling me petty and conniving! As if humans have any room to talk!"

<Evil Points Acquired>

Evidently Russell isn't used to taunting, snapping back at me with flushed cheeks. "Let go of Heine already! I've heard all about you. You conquered the impregnable Tower of Duster and you killed Gadalkand! I bet you used some dirty tricks for both feats!"

"Stop, Russell. Don't taunt him! Also, Six! Stop groping me every time you say something! Wai—stop!"

<Evil Points Acquired>

I pull Heine closer, drawing my pistol from my hip. "Let's make sure we understand each other, little man. Of all the types of villains in the world, the kind I can't stand the most is kids like you. I bet you say things like 'Can I keep him as my toy?' and 'I'm bored; can I break him now?' I've heard it all before."

"I have no idea what you're talking about...! I only say things like that every once in a while! And let go of Heine already! If you want to fight me, I'll indulge you. Just stop fondling my friend!"

<Evil Points Acquired>

He doesn't seem to realize I've got a weapon in my hand.

He may be a member of the Elite Four, but I'll admit I'm not totally thrilled at the idea of killing a kid. But them's the breaks in an evil organization.

I point the barrel of my gun at Russell and prepare to squeeze the trigger. Just then...

"Come on, Six, listen to me! I'm here as an official envoy to this country. If you attack us, that'll complicate things between this kingdom and yours! And for the last time, stop groping my breasts!"

Even as Heine the Hostage tries desperately to convince me, the flow of Evil Points continues.

“Raaaaaagh! All right, old man, you better have a good reason for this! You trying to mess with Kisaragi?! Betrayal comes with a high price tag!”

“Wh-wh-what in blazes?! Guards!! GUARDS!!”

Bursting into the banquet hall, I demand answers from Engel. “Don’t ‘what in blazes’ me, old man! Is your country selling water crystals to the demons? Hmm? Planning an alliance with them, are you? Maybe hoping to join in their invasion plans? Well?”

“Ah. I see you ran into Lady Heine. Your name was Six, yes? Listen to me.”

Engel sits in a plush, elaborate chair in the middle of the room. He appears to be sitting to keep his weight off a bad knee. Snow has him cornered inside his chair. He looks to me and shakes his head deliberately, trying to reassure me.

Snow’s eyes go wide at this exchange, and she, too, starts demanding answers from the prince. “Is this true, Your Highness? Why is Heine of the Flames here in your castle? If there’s any truth to what Six is saying, we cannot very well ignore the threat!”

“Lady Snow, allow me to explain. Sir Six is mistaken about an alliance with the Demon Lord’s Army. We’ve only agreed to a nonaggression pact. The demons are intelligent. They’re more than capable of negotiating with us. After a few meetings, we found we could come to a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

Ah, so this old man figured he could play both sides.

Thinking back on it, there were always these sorts of countries, even on Earth. The sort that wouldn’t take a clear stance on Kisaragi, even knowing we were an evil megacorporation. Once the winner was obvious, they’d jump in with the winning side at the last minute.

I suppose that’s ultimately what diplomacy is all about, but I’ve never seen it end well for any country that tries it. Once the dust settles, they’re usually bullied into concessions, maybe signing an unfair treaty. Other times they just end up being annexed in the end anyway.

I mean, that’s how we operated. I can’t imagine it’s any different here.

“We, of course, have no intention of becoming your enemy. You are aware of the reason the demons resorted to war, yes? They say they were forced into it by the Sand King. The desertification of their lands left them with no other choice. Indeed, we’ll be happy to mediate negotiations between you and the Demon Lord. Why not take this opportunity to end the war entirely?”

Engel shakes his head in a gesture that I guess is meant to demonstrate he's the adult in the room. The gesture has no effect on Snow, who abandons her respectful tone for a combative one.

"So long as the Sand King exists, the demons will eventually run out of habitable land. So long as they crave new land, there's no room for peace!"

I don't know who this Sand King is, but eventually he's going to turn all the demon country into desert. In which case, they have no choice but to invade other countries for their land.

Just like us. We're here in search of new lands to conquer.

"Actually, if you're willing to negotiate, we're open to the possibility of peace."

I hear the voice come from the entrance. I turn to see Heine standing there, arms still restrained behind her back.

Oh yeah. I guess I was in such a rush to get back here that I forgot to remove those cuffs.

"How dare you speak of peace! How many of our soldiers do you think lost their lives fighting you?! They were all good men. Heath, who came up with schemes to embezzle money... Molech, who sent me bribes... And just as importantly, you melted my precious sword Iceberg! I haven't forgotten what you did to her!" Snow reveals bits of damning information during her angry tirade.

Ignoring her, Heine smiles seductively and saunters over to Engel. "I'd say we're about even on that count, given that you killed Gadalkand. Thanks to Prince Engel's help, we might find a solution to the Sand King problem, too. Evidently, there's something in this kingdom's ancient ruins that can defeat it. That's actually why we're here today."

...Ancient ruins? Are those the same ruins Tillis mentioned?

Engel helpfully picks up the thread and fills in the details. "Basically, if we can do something about the Sand King, there's no need for war between the Demon Lord's Army and our kingdoms. Do you see now, Lady Snow? Our kingdom hasn't betrayed anyone. In fact, this proposal is meant to provide a helping hand to the kingdom of Grace. You were facing defeat after all. However..."

His expression clouds with sadness.

"...it appears Lady Snow did not understand our sincere intent. Not only that, she decided to threaten us..."

Engel deliberately shakes his head, and Snow can't find the words to respond.

Heine smiles mischievously. "We heard from Prince Engel that you all stopped buying water crystals. We offered to take those excess

water crystals off their hands; you think you can just stroll back in and buy more?"

Ah, I see. The glut of water crystals opened the doors for the Demon Lord's Army to step in.

"Snow, was it? Are you sure you should be so aggressive?" Heine teases. "Depending on how this plays out, you might end up making an enemy of both Toris *and* the Demon Lord's Army."

"Grr... Grrrr...!"

Seems Snow has realized the weakness of her position, grinding her teeth in frustration.

But as if driven by a sudden insight, she grabs Engel's arm and presses up to him...

"Surely Your Highness would choose the kingdom of Grace over the demons, yes? I may have come on more strongly than intended earlier, but I have believed in your judgment, Your Highness. Why don't we get better acquainted, as a sign of our kingdoms' friendship?"

"H-hey, wait, you're willing to go that far for your country? P-Prince Engel! I would be happy to keep you company..."

Suddenly the two women are engaging in a tug-of-war for Prince Engel's attention.

Oh, come on. This is ridiculous.

"Heine! You, a high-ranking demon resorting to seduction? Do you have no sense of shame?! Surely Your Highness finds me more attractive, yes?"

"Wh-what are you talking about?! You're the one who started with the seduction! I—I met His Highness first! You should be the one to back off! Your Highness will choose me, right?"

This is just bizarre. There's so much wrong here.

Why are these beautiful women fighting over this ugly old dude instead of *me*?

Despite being in a situation that's right out of a harem genre story, Engel maintains his calm and answers them both. "I appreciate your gestures, but surely we shouldn't let something like this influence the outcome of diplomacy."

"Wh-what's wrong, Your Highness?! You're very different than your reputation!"

"All you could do was stare at my chest yesterday, and now you're acting like you're above it all. What happened between then and now?!"

Engel remains as calm as a sage, stoic in the face of the pair's attempts at seduction. "For whatever reason, right before this banquet started, I suddenly felt like a new man. I started to question my shallow obsession with women..."

"Prince Engel, are you sure you are well?! You're a completely

different person from the description provided to me by Princess Tillis!"

"I can't get over the fact that you went from calmly sexually harassing me yesterday to this!"

The two corner Engel, but he looks unfazed.

As a fellow man, this is a situation that makes me grind my teeth together with envy, but maybe this guy's more than he appears.

However...

"Prince Engel! I, Snow, may have problems with my personality, but I'm confident in my face and body! Surely it's better between two humans than with some random demon!" Snow approaches Engel, eyes bloodshot from her desperation not to let this potential sugar daddy get away.

Huh? So she actually is aware of her personality flaws?

"Wh-what?! P-Prince Engel! I, Heine, am faithful and diligent. I—I... Um..."

Heine's a bit turned off by Snow's aggression, but she presses on with her seduction attempt to avoid losing.

But the prince himself...?

"Sigh. What am I to do with you? I keep telling you I have no interest in you two..."

He sighs out a remark worthy of a stoic protagonist with no libido to speak of, then glances toward me with a wry, almost gloating smile.

...This feels like the dictionary definition of failure.

It's the feeling when you wait in line for a collector's item and the person in front of you buys the last one.

The feeling when you hear the Kisaragi Supreme Leaders are bathing and take a peek...and get an eyeful of naked Tiger Man.

The feeling when brand-new Combat Agents who join up later shoot past me and end up in positions of power.

The feeling when I get my ass kicked by a Hero.

But compared to all those, the feeling of defeat at the hands of the man in front of me is overwhelming.

"What is it, Six? You've got that determined look again. You're not planning anything stupid, are you?" Alice prods me from behind, trying to warn me.

"Sorry, Alice. I'm about to do something ridiculous, but can you just give me a pass this time? There are times when a man just can't back down."

"...I don't understand what it is you're talking about, but I'm your partner and evil corporate colleague. I'll stand by you to the end, no matter what evil deeds you commit. Go ahead and relax," Alice says, clearly sensing my determination. Aww, I think I'm gonna cry.

It's all right, I have a reliable partner. She'll figure it out, regardless of what happens.

"Damn you, Heine! I've hated you from the moment I met you. Dangling those stupidly huge tits out and sucking up to every man in sight! Not only is there overlap in our character types, but you're trying to seduce *my* target...!"

"I'm not dangling anything! And as for sucking up, what the hell is wrong with you! And I'm not the same character type as you are! I'm not nearly as greedy!"

Despite the fact that the two fighting over him are about to start grappling with each other, Engel himself looks untroubled.

I wander up next to the prince. "Hey, man, the situation in this hall's getting pretty ugly, huh? How about I do a little party trick to lighten the mood?"

"A party trick? Lady Snow mentioned fighting was your area of expertise, but you can do party tricks also? Very well. See what you can do to clear the air in here."

With the tables turned to his advantage, Engel's manner of speaking has changed entirely. He doesn't seem to be expecting much, but everyone looks over at me as he gives his permission...

"You're the perverted woman who let Six take all those racy pictures when you fought us! Your Highness, you should avoid women with no modesty, like this demon. On that front, I'm still pure! I can even ride unicorns..."

"Shut your mouth! I didn't expose myself like that because I wanted to! It's all Six's fault...!"

Ignoring the two as their argument intensifies, I step behind Engel, who waits with an expression of curiosity.

"Hmm? If you stand there, I won't be able to see your trick, Six."

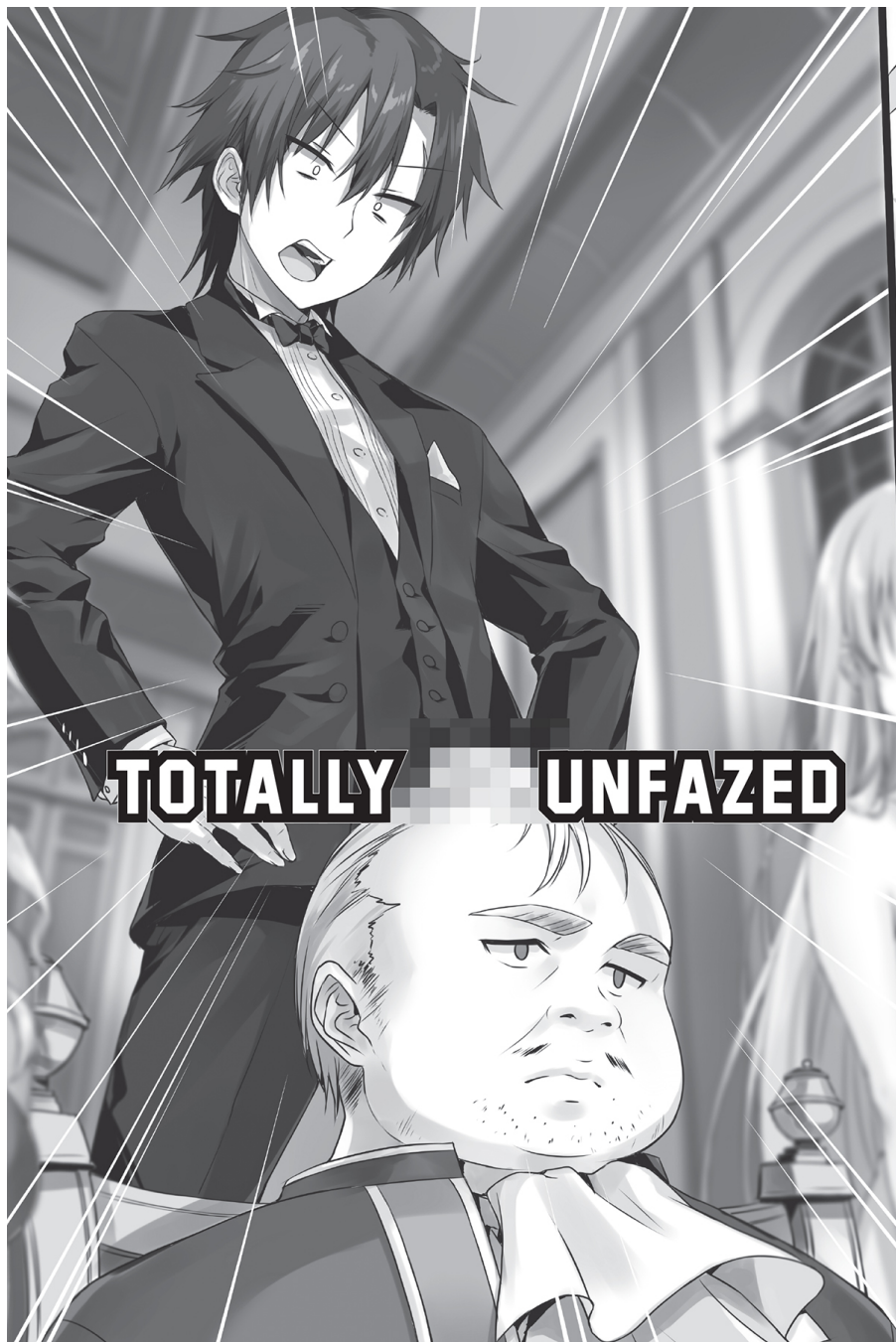
I let those words go in one ear and out the other. Alice notices that I've reached down to grab the zipper on my fly.

As I watch the android's oddly human-looking expression of bewilderment...

"All right, here I go. This is one of the most famous can't-miss party tricks passed down through the generations in my country!"

"Topknot!"

<Evil Points Acquired>





[Declaration of War]

The kingdom of Toris, unable to tolerate the attempts at intimidation of a longtime ally by your kingdom's envoys and the blatantly disrespectful actions against Crown Prince Engel, hereby formally declare war upon the kingdom of Grace.

As a consequence, we will be withdrawing all diplomatic personnel, suspending export of water crystals, and implementing all available economic sanctions.

If the kingdom of Grace wishes to demonstrate its remorse, it may do so by turning over the two envoys. Otherwise, the kingdom of Toris will not hesitate to resort to the use of force and acquire recompense in blood.





1

The audience chamber, Kingdom of Grace.

"Snow, raise your head," Tillis orders a trembling Snow.

"...Yes, Your Highness."

Seems they haven't found the king yet since Tillis is sitting on the throne.

Having successfully escaped...that is, returned, from Toris, we're here to report on our mission.

As a result of our report, Snow is bowed flat against the floor, head pressed down in supplication and avoiding eye contact with the calmly smiling Tillis.

She fearfully raises her head, trying to gauge the mood in the room.

"Snow, what's done is done," I tell her. "Stop moping and move on."

"You bastard! You bastard! YOU BASTAAAARD!"

Snow jumps up and snarls at me at my attempt to comfort her.

My ultimate party trick froze time in the banquet hall, then caused the knights to go berserk.

Alice got us out of the situation with her quick thinking, taking Engel hostage and buying us the space to get out of the castle...

"I did not expect to receive a declaration of war for sending Snow on a mission of friendship." What comes out of Tillis's mouth sounds like a half chuckle. Her tone is mild, but her eyes show no sign of amusement.

"Your Highness! It's truly not my fault. I was a step away from successfully seducing Prince Engel! If I, Snow, wound up unable to ride a unicorn, Toris would owe our kingdom, and I could indulge in a life of luxury. Hence I put myself out there with the intent to seduce him..."

“I—I see. I had hoped you would use some of your wiles, but I did not expect that level of commitment from you...”

Tillis seems a little repulsed by the explanation, but Snow points her finger at me.

“But this fool ruined it all! Six, what possessed you to do something so stupid?! Just how badly diseased is your soul that you could place such a thing atop the prince’s head?!”

“How dare you call it stupid! It’s a legendary party trick in my country! Each country has its own culture and its own standards. It’s a big world. Don’t judge everything by your narrow standards.”

Still, I do feel a little bad about it, and I’m sitting on the floor with my legs under me in penitence.

“A-and why did you, Sir Six, perform such a party trick...?”

“I was pissed off. I guess I regret it now, though.”

“Put more sincerity behind your apology, dammit!”

I mean, what’s done is done. I wish we could move on already.

“In addition to the crime against the prince...the declaration of war notes that there were attempts at intimidation...”

Tillis looks over the declaration, then casts her gaze to Snow.

“Oh! That’s all her!” I said. “She was throwing in little threats here and there. She even requested bribes from their diplomrrrph...!”

“Damn you! It’s a misunderstanding, Your Highness. I wasn’t trying to intimidate them. I was only trying to secure an advantage in negotiations by showing we had the teeth to back up our words... As for a bribe? Why, that was also a diplomatic tactic! I was only trying to see how they’d react to a straight-up demand!”

Snow covers my mouth with her hand, flinging outlandish excuses to see if they’ll stick.

Tillis calmly gazes down at Snow from the throne. “Snow, Captain of the Royal Guard. You are hereby stripped of your command. You are to remain in your current role and continue serving as second in command of the squadron.”

“Nooooooo... Just as I finally recover my position, I’m demoted again...”

Tears stream down Snow’s face, but Tillis simply sighs.

“Well, it appears I have to add this mess to the list of issues to deal with... Sir Six, what do you intend to do? Unfortunately, blame for this incident rests squarely upon our shoulders. Even if we engage in open warfare, it’s likely our neighboring countries will side with Toris...”

“Alice says we should go around loudly advertising the fact that Toris has signed a nonaggression pact with the Demon Lord. Declare them enemies of humanity. If they bring up this incident, we deny it ever happened and claim it’s a lie they’ve made up to distract from the

fact they've betrayed everybody else."

Tillis goes motionless for a moment, then raises her brow.

"...I'm well aware I'm no saint, but *her* personality is something else. Still, let us go with that tactic for the neighboring countries. The nonaggression pact is real, after all..."

Even as she seems a little put off by the sheer audacity of the tactic, Tillis nods her assent to the proposal.

Alice figures so long as we stick to our story, the other countries won't consider us the only bad guy in this fight.

"No doubt Toris will require time to prepare for war, so I doubt they will invade any time soon. At this point, there's nothing we can do but reinforce our defenses and prepare for attacks from both the Demon Lord's Army and Toris." Tillis appears to have settled that particular issue to her satisfaction, her expression softening into something less stern. "Still, the primary issue remains... How shall we secure the water we need...?"

She frowns with concern...

As though waiting for that opening, Snow raises her head and pipes up. "Your Highness, I believe I have a solution! This man can requisition items from his country. Why not have him request a large supply of water? And once that solves our water problems, perhaps I can be restored to my old rank..."

"Hold up, just how many points do you think I have? It'd cost way too much to get enough water to fill the needs for an entire country! Besides, this is your fault for taking so long to seduce that old man! That body of is yours is your only real asset, and you can't even use it properly!"

Snow raises her brows in anger...! "That's enough out of you! It's your damned fault I got demoted!"

"Yeah? You wanna go? Want a piece of this?! I'll kick your sorry ass!"

As we start grappling, Tillis lets out a sigh of exasperation.

While locked in a test of arm strength with me, Snow appears to have a realization of some sort.

"Wait! Your Highness, the rain-making artifact is still usable! With His Majesty nowhere to be found, if Your Highness can take it upon yourself...!"

"Still, the primary issue remains... How shall we secure the water we need...?" Tillis completely ignores Snow, repeating her line from earlier.

Still grappling with Snow, I lower my voice and start whispering.

"Hey, Snow, I'll grab Tillis. You go gather up enough people for the ritual. We aren't betraying her; it's for the good of the country. Gather a crowd in the courtyard and tell them Tillis is going to activate the

artifact...”

“Of course, we can make it impossible for her to back down! You’re right. This isn’t a betrayal; it’s to save the country. No doubt in the end, Her Highness will understand...”

“Ah, I’ve got it!” Tillis interrupts our whispered conversation with an overly cheerful note.

Is it my imagination, or does she seem a little panicked?

“Knight Snow, I hereby task you with an assignment.”

Noticing my gaze, Tillis hardens her expression, turning a solemn look toward the kneeling Snow.

“The Tezan Desert, the desolate domain of the Sand King. You are aware of tales that the center of this desert is lush with vegetation, yes? And what the fruits that grow on these trees can do?”

“Yes, Your Highness! The water fruits, despite being only the size of a fingertip, produce a pool’s worth of water when squeezed... Um... Your Highness? I’m sure I’m mistaken but...”

Tillis orders flatly to a pale and trembling Snow.

“Go get those fruits.”

2

“I’m not going! You can’t make me! The Sand King is one of those giant monsters that even the Demon Lord runs away from! Wandering into its territory is suicide!”

Rose is throwing a tantrum, clinging to the city gate and refusing to budge.

“It’s all right, Rose, we’re not actually going to fight the Sand King! Besides, I’m told the Sand King’s only active during the day. We’re going to sneak in and out at night, all right? I’ll buy you lots of delicious meat when we return!”

“Stop fighting! If I’m getting dragged into it, so are you! Snow’ll buy you delicious meats, and I’ll prepare some rare sweets! You ever had candy? Besides, we’re all responsible for screwing up that last mission! You can’t just sit this one out!”

Snow and I try our hand at persuasion, but Rose digs her nails into the city gate and refuses to budge.

“You can’t get me to listen to you just by offering me tasty food! As for the last mission being everyone’s fault, I didn’t even do anything! Though I am interested in that ‘candy’ you mentioned! What’s it like?”

Despite the tears welling up in her eyes, Rose appears to be less

panicked than she lets on, and Alice takes out something, offering it to Rose.

“Well, if the two of them are offering you treats, I’ll offer a power-up item. Do you know what this is?”

It appears this draws Rose’s curiosity, and she stops crying.

“...What is it?”

“This is a battery. It’s concentrated electric energy. Try eating it. You’ll be able to breathe lightning breath...”

“I’m not eating that! That’s clearly not food!”

Rose turns her face away, but Snow and I exchange glances.

“Now, now. It’s not good to be a picky eater. Here, let me feed it to you. If you eat this and get stronger, you won’t have to worry about the Sand King. Please, Rose, just say ‘ah’...”

“Wh-whoa, I’m actually kind of impressed. She’s resisting my power armor...! But give it up! Starting today, you’re going to be the Electric Chimera...!”

“I’ll go! I’ll go already! I’ll go; just don’t make me eat that!”

Piling into the buggy, we speed along the dark roads with the night vision-equipped Alice at the wheel.

“*Sniff, sniff...* When we get home you owe me delicious meat and candy... I won’t forget...”

“I won’t forgive them... I absolutely won’t forgive them... That Harmel, who whispered sweet words to me despite being engaged... Gilbert, who showed me kindness despite having a wife and children... Isaac, who offered me a hand, telling me I would ruin my dress, then turned out to be gay... All the men of that kingdom, all of them, toying with my feelings...!” Grimm mutters darkly. She had gotten into the buggy early, keeping to herself while we struggled to convince Rose. Seems she’s still smarting from her failures in Toris.

It’s not like any of the men did her wrong. It was Grimm who was getting the wrong idea, but it doesn’t seem that logic is going to work on this walking time bomb.

Oh, speaking of which.

“Hey, Grimm, I wanted to ask you something.” Something had been bothering me since that evening.

“What is it, Commander? I’m in a bad mood. I’m fouler than the Demon Lord’s Army and pointier than Blood the Hedgehog! Watch yourself. I’ll curse you if you ask a stupid question!”

“I just wanted to ask about your curses, Miss Dumpsalot... Okay, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean that! Don’t glare at me while clutching a doll! It’s creepy as hell!”

Yeah, what I wanted to ask about was her curses. When we were in Toris the other day, the prince was acting pretty oddly. Or, more

precisely, he was the complete opposite of his reputation. And something about that bothered me.

“What is it? Do you want to curse someone? What a coincidence! I’m in a mood to curse someone tonight. How about it, Commander? Once we’re done with this mission, shall we go on a curse-spreading date?”

“Hell no. And what the hell is a curse-spreading date anyway? Do you go around cursing random people every time you’re dumped?”

Grimm hugs her knees to her chest, looking at me with her head tilted to one side.

“So you tossed a curse at me when we were in the castle in Toris, right? The impotence one. What happens if the target dodges the curse? I noticed the ring you offered as a sacrifice vanished.”

“Ordinarily, you can’t actually dodge a curse. But, well, let’s take Heine for example. When I was trying to curse her, the bitch hid behind a golem. Basically, unless you hide behind a wall that’s been animated using magic, the curse keeps going until it hits a living creature and triggers...” Grimm trails off mid-explanation, the color swiftly draining from her face.

“So where did that curse go?”

“I bet it went out to play.”

I grab Grimm’s head as she tries to look away. “Are you familiar with the prince of Toris’s reputation and all the rumors surrounding him?”

“Nope, not at all. Rose is my only friend, after all. I have no one to trade gossip with!”

I ignore Grimm’s casually depressing statement.

“The prince had quite a reputation as a handsy old fart. He couldn’t keep his hands to himself when he saw a beautiful young woman. Snow was all excited hearing about that reputation, but he basically ignored her efforts...”

Grimm curls her lips into a slight smile, then presses her index finger to my lips to quiet me. “Say, Commander? Isn’t the idea of sharing a secret kind of romantic?”

I swat her hand out of the way. “Nope! Not at all! Hey, listen up, everyone! Looks like Grimm really stepped in it this time!”

“Wait, Commander! We can’t be sure that it’s my curse’s fault! There might be other reasons! Like he might just have been sick that day! Or maybe Snow just wasn’t very attractive!”

“What did you just say, Grimm? Something about me being unattractive?”

Ah-ha! So that old man got hit by Grimm’s curse and became impotent!

“Damn! That’s a whole new type of scary! I mean, there are times

when I'm repelled by Snow's greed and occasional shortcomings, but you're on a completely different level of awful!"

"H-how about if we think of it this way? I protected Snow's virtue! I—I mean Snow was about to sell herself for way below market value! A girl should be pickier about who she lets touch her!" Grimm starts laying out an unconvincing string of excuses.

"Uh, didn't you show me your underwear when we first met?"

"W-well that...! At the time I thought you were a good catch! Young and already a squadron commander! I didn't know you were a spendthrift, perennial lackey who was a complete failure as a man..."

.....

"As for 'girls' being pickier about who they get close to, are you even at an age where you can call yourself a girl?"

"O Great Lord Zenarith, I beseech thee! Deliver disaster unto this man! Become unable to masturbate...!"

"Stop! If you trigger that curse I'm gonna make you pay for it with your body!"

I hurriedly hold down Grimm to stop her curse, when I hear soft laughter coming from next to me.

This is hardly the time to be laughing; not when we're about to go strolling through the Sand King's domain. I look over to see which fool is laughing and see Rose happily giggling away.

"Boss. I'm still afraid of the Sand King, but I don't mind going out on trips with everyone like this. It's like a picnic!"

The innocent laughter drains the malice from Grimm and me. We just exchange glances and let out a tired laugh.

3

"Say, Rose. You said something about it being like a picnic earlier," Grimm comments. "Are you sure? Can you look at this and say the same thing? Whose mouth was going on about picnics? Was it this one?"

"Ow, ow! I'm thowwy! I'm thowwy!"

Our buggy is currently stuck in the jaws of a giant antlion.

"Can you two stop playing around and do something? What the hell is that thing?!"

Flashing a light out into the night reveals a giant grotesque bug.

Grabbing the seat in front of me as the buggy tilts to the side, I call out to Grimm, who is busily pinching Rose's cheeks.

"That's a huge antlion! It's a deadly magical monster that makes its nests in the Tezan Desert, devouring passing animals! This is

definitely the wrong kind of opponent for a delicate and frail Miss Grimm! In fact, I really can't handle bugs at all!"

"Owfh! Ow!"

Grimm's hands tighten their grip on Rose's cheeks.

"S-so what are we going to do, Six?" Snow asks. "Kill it? That thing's a pretty strong opponent! It's true that given my recent demotion, I'd like to have some wins under my belt, but..."

"I'm pretty fond of resting on my laurels myself, but not enough to take on that thing...! I know! Bug spray! Let's have Kisaragi send us enough of the powerful bug spray, Zap'em, to take out this bug..." I reach for my wrist teleporter in a panic.

Alice, who had been randomly shifting gears, turns to me and snaps me out of it. "Do you have any idea how much bug spray we'd need to kill something that big? Hold on, I'm going to floor it. Kisaragi Corporation vehicles have excellent performance. No mere bug is going to defeat one."

As a fellow Kisaragi-manufactured machine, Alice apparently doesn't want our buggy to lose. She revs up the buggy's engine and accelerates.

The rapidly spinning tires eat away at the giant creature's body. Unable to bear it for long, the antlion opens its jaws, letting us go.

As the buggy lands on the soft sand below and escapes, everyone inside lets out a sigh of relief.

"<Hey, Alice, don't you think this planet's got too much in the way of dangerous fauna? I mean, first the forest and now this. Are you sure our bosses want land crawling with these things? Why don't we just abandon this place and head back to Earth?>"

"<However inhospitable it might seem, land is still land. If the population keeps growing at the current rate, we'll run out of habitable land on Earth sometime in the next ten years. Dangerous life-forms can be exterminated. Desolate lands can be improved. There's nothing we can't do. Kisaragi's technology is amazing. After all, it created me.>"

Alice replies to my remark in Japanese. Evidently, she's got a lot of confidence and pride in the Kisaragi technology that created her. She's not usually so assertive.

"<...Well, I suppose. Yeah, you're right. I don't know what this Sand King actually is, but for Kisaragi, it's just another target. Besides, if we can get rid of it, our rivals will calm down a bit, right? In that case, killing it now is a pretty viable option. Kill it and force the demons to hand over some of their territory.>"

"<Good thinking, Six. I'm glad you haven't forgotten our assignment. Let's increase Kisaragi's territory by the end of the month. All we've got right now is that tiny hideout. We need to fulfill our

quota before Astaroth loses her patience. >”

Alice and I share a malicious grin.

A moon larger than the one seen from Earth quietly illuminates the desert sky. Thanks to the abundant light, we easily find the trees we’re looking for.

Dismounting from the buggy, we take a few steps to check the ground underfoot. I stomp hard enough that my footfalls ring out with audible thumps, but perhaps because of the root systems, the ground is as firm as stone.

“Huh, there’s actually trees growing in the middle of the desert. They don’t seem to have leaves. I wonder if they’re a type of cactus.”

“Could be there’s an aquifer below us. You guys start gathering the fruits. I’ll search underground.”

Leaving Alice to her surveying, I take a glance around. “It’s not just the animals on this planet that are weird. The plant life’s odd, too. Is there really water in this tiny fruit?” I pick a piece of fruit growing on one of the trees and stare intently at it.

“I’m told those fruits are sealed with magic, compressing the water inside. If you use dispelling magic and squeeze it, it’ll produce an enormous amount of water. If we grab all the fruit we see, it should be enough of an accomplishment to undo my demotion!”

At Snow’s excited talk, Alice twitches.

“Again with the magic. Every time I hear that ridiculous word, it’s like a direct insult to my very existence.”

“Does this brat still not believe magic is real?! I mean, you’ve seen me curse people. How do you explain the fact that my dolls and rings disappear as payment?”

These two can’t seem to let this subject drop. Every time magic comes up they get into an argument.

Alice raises her head slowly, as if not wanting to deal with the subject, and starts manipulating her teleporter. A few moments later, underground surveying equipment appears near her hands.

“See? I just produced tools out of thin air. This isn’t magic. Since I can do the same thing, Grimm’s sacrifices aren’t evidence of magic.”

“Wait a minute. That thing you two are always doing—it’s not magic?! How do you explain the fact that I can’t wear shoes as a price for one of my curses?”

I get that science and superstition are like oil and water, but given the fact there might be monsters nearby, I wish they’d argue a little more quietly.

“I keep telling you. Curses are just a form of hypnosis. As for these ‘costs’ when you fail. It’s just self-suggestion to strengthen the hypnotic effect.”

“What a stubborn little brat! Fine! If you’re going to insist, I’ll cast a curse on you! If you want to keep claiming it’s hypnosis then be my guest!”

Grimm clutches at a doll, glaring sharply at Alice—

“Hey, Six, go ahead and restrain Grimm for a bit. I’ll have Kisaragi send us some shoes, and we can force her to wear them. I’m tired of moving her around on a wheelchair. I’ll prove to her once and for all that there’s no such thing as curses or costs.”

“All right, leave it to me.”

“Nooooooo! Stop! Don’t you dare! If you put shoes on me, my body will explode into a million pieces! You don’t want to see something that gory, do you?! You won’t be able to eat for at least three days!”

Seriously? She explodes if she ignores the cost of a curse?

“Self-destructing is the dream of every villain. If Grimm explodes, we’ll go ahead and promote her into a full Kisaragi operative. I’ll leave a Kisaragi badge on your grave.”

“Commander! Stop this child! Snow! Rose! Stop gathering fruit and help me!”

As Grimm struggles against my restraining hold, Alice begins working with her device—

Just then...

“Wh-whoa?! A-an earthquake?!”

At the sudden shaking under my feet, I can’t help but let go of Grimm.

The others lose their footing from the shaking and crouch down, while the newly released Grimm opens some distance between us.

“Now see! This is Lord Zenarith’s anger! Your disrespect toward me caused the ground to shake!”

She puffs out her chest and points her finger at Alice...

But Alice ignores both Grimm and the earthquake, starting her survey of the ground below.

“You little brat. You’ve been getting away with far too much blasphemy! Go on, apologize to Miss Grimm...” But before Grimm can finish speaking, the ground shakes again, as if reacting to the yelling. Everyone in the area goes quiet.

“...Guys, get in the buggy. Not another word. Just get in quietly. We’re leaving.”

Alice looks up from her survey and issues the instructions. I can’t shake the bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, but I follow the instructions without complaint.

The others, feeling something is amiss, climb into the buggy without a sound. Once Alice confirms everyone’s here, she silently

revs the engine—!

“Hey, Alice, I’m tired of this planet. Can we go home yet?”

“Don’t say things like that, partner. This planet’s got so many interesting things going for it!”

The ground shakes much more violently as the buggy darts ahead.

“The ground’s starting to bulge. What’s going on?!”

“Looks like we’re currently on the Sand King’s back. After checking the results of my scan, it seems this entire area registers as a life-form.”

Even as Alice explains, the trees receding in the distance begin to bulge upward. With it flows a torrent of sand.

The moonlight reveals a giant mole with trees growing on its back.

Roughly the size of a school gymnasium, this is the giant monster known as the Sand King.

“Wow, that’s the first time I’ve seen the Sand King. I heard it was big, but I had no idea it was *that* big...”

Rose observes rather casually as Snow gazes intently at the gathered fruit. “Say, Six. Does that mean this fruit is the Sand King’s...?”

“It’s probably an organ for storing water, yeah. Not sure running off with them was a good idea.”

As if in response, the Sand King finishes its leisurely process of standing and glances at our buggy. To be honest, it’s kinda cute, and it twitches its nose just before—

“Six! The Sand King’s following us! Wh-wh-what do we do? It’s really fast for its size! It’s going to catch us!”

Despite its enormous size, it races after the buggy.

“Alice! Can’t this thing go any faster?! You said Kisaragi’s technology is awesome! Didn’t you say there’s nothing we couldn’t do?!”

“Calm down, Six. Kisaragi’s save and load technology is peerless. I’ll do better next time.”

“You’re the only one who can make use of it! Screw it! Let’s play whack-a-mole!”

With a body that big, I doubt even a rifle will do much to it. But if I can get close enough to slash a vital organ with my R-Buzzsaw...!

“Hold on, Six. When I give the signal, jump out of the car. Don’t make a sound. Also, no movement of any kind, no matter what happens.”

After issuing some odd instructions, Alice unlocks the doors, then suddenly turns the wheel, sending the buggy skidding into a wide arc.

“Now!”

I jump out of the buggy at Alice’s command, rolling onto the desert sands.

Instead of attacking me, the Sand King chases after the buggy heading off in the opposite direction.

The buggy and Sand King recede into the distance.

I guess the Sand King eventually caught up to the buggy and attacked it, given the distant sounds of an explosion...

“We should be far enough away now.”

With the buggy destroyed by the Sand King, we’ve started our walk back to town.

Lit by the shimmering moon’s glow, Alice leads the way without so much as stumbling on the sand. “Doesn’t seem it’s nearby for the time being. Moles have poor eyesight, but they can find their prey through sound and vibrations.”

“Dammit! Trudging across the desert on foot?! This is torture! And of course we lost the buggy. All those points down the drain...”

It’s been several hours since the Sand King started chasing us. We’ve been walking the whole time.

“Hey, Six, what’s your point count?”

“I’ve only got ten right now. Having them send us a tent will clean me out. I was still in the negatives until last month. Yet, I managed to save up a pretty impressive amount by diligently doing acts of villainy...”

“J-just what are d-diligent acts of villainy...?”

It costs about three hundred points to secure a buggy, and I spent most of my points ordering a buggy for our trip to Toris and buying equipment to fight the past few skirmishes.

I want to get some sort of vehicle to cross this damn desert, but I can’t do that with the points on hand.

“So, Rose... You’re gonna get a lot of meat and sweets when we get back to town, right? I’ll buy you lots of veggies if you carry me on your back. The cold sands at night are pretty harsh on bare feet. And I left my wheels at my room.”

“Why did you try a curse that would make it impossible to wear shoes? Wasn’t there a better curse to try?”

Behind us, Grimm is begging for Rose to carry her.

“That’s a long story. A very long story... The story begins...years ago...”

“Wait, how many years ago...? I think I missed a word...”

It’s a peaceful conversation. Makes it pretty hard to believe we were being chased by the Sand King a few hours ago.

Snow furrows her brow, smiling ruefully. “I dropped most of the

fruits while running away and only kept one, but..." She holds up the small fruit. "Look, Six. We took water from the Sand King and got away without losing anyone. That's plenty to be proud of... You agree, right?"

Illuminated by the glow of the incredibly large moon, she smiles happily.

Snow's smile is infectious as the others all relax with the realization we've escaped the Sand King's wrath.

Far from Earth on this moonlit desert...

"...Yeah, agreed."

...I couldn't help but smile as well.

[Desert Crossing: Day One]

As the desert sun beats down on me, I force my heavy legs onward.

“Why’s it so *hot*?!” Snow complains for the umpteenth time today, her mildly inspirational remark from last night long forgotten.

“Shut up! We’re all roasting here. Your complaining’s just making it feel hotter!”

The mystical night gave way to a blazing sun. After basking in a feeling of comradery last night, right now we’d be at each other’s throats if we weren’t busy being burned alive.

“Speaking of things that feel hotter, your armor! Take that damned black armor off! Just looking at you makes me feel hotter!”

“This thing’s equipped with a body-heat adjuster! It makes trudging through the desert at least a little bit more bearable!”

My power armor is a useful piece of equipment that makes it easier to sleep outdoors even during broad daylight in the desert or the extreme cold of the Arctic.

Of course, it’s been years since I had it properly maintained, so the internal cooler isn’t working as well as it ought to, but I’m probably still better off than the others.

“Wh-what...?! You son of a...! Let me have a piece of that armor! Even if it’s just the breastplate!”

“There’d be no point. This armor’s made for my body and my body only. If you’re so damn hot, why don’t you just strip naked?”

We begin a futile argument in the middle of the Tezan Desert.

“Will you two stop? Arguments will just make you hungrier and thirstier! Come on! It’s not that far! Let’s just get through this!” Rose maintains a positive attitude while carrying the motionless Grimm on her back. It’s only the first day of our march, but Grimm’s already dead weight.

“Yeah! Listen to Rose. She’s the youngest here, but she’s been the most mature. You’ve been bitching the loudest here.”

“Grimm was a lot louder until just a few minutes ago!”

As a follower of a dark god and basically half-undead, Grimm and the sun aren’t exactly friends. The intense sunlight quickly dried her out and knocked her out of the march. We covered her with a hood to avoid mummifying her, but I’d like to revive her as soon as possible.

“I suppose the one bright side to this desert march is that we don’t

have to worry about water. I don't need it, but the rest of you will die without it. Even if we only have one, this fruit is a saving grace," Alice says cheerfully from the front of our convoy as she turns the fruit over in her palm.

Snow looks at her curiously. "You know, I'd heard about Alice, but I had trouble believing she was a golem. She doesn't look much different from a human at first glance..."

"Technically, I'm not a golem, but whatever. Close enough."

Currently we're having Alice guide us using her internal map. She's also rationing our water. If we didn't have her along, we'd have gotten lost in the middle of the desert and ended up as vulture food.

Unlike a rapidly mummifying archbishop, my partner's plenty useful here and there.

"The water is great, but I'd like something to eat, too..."

"...True. If worse comes to worst, we can eat monsters we encounter. Survival is a core skill for a Combat Agent. We can't be too picky about what we eat when survival's at stake. Let's eat the next monster we run into! Got it?"

My tone leaves no room for argument, and the others nod meekly in response.

[Desert Crossing: Day Two]

“Nope, nope, nope, nope. Can’t do it! This thing’s still got the head on! I mean, I can’t eat a humanoid!”

“Boss, you were the one who said we’re eating the next monster we run into! Please don’t be a picky eater. You’ll die if you don’t eat.”

“Where’s your usual bravado? How pathetic. Rose, pry his jaws open. I’ll force the food down his throat.”

In the middle of the moonlit desert, we’re currently stewing orcs in a pot.

“Anything but orcs! I mean, we can talk to these things!”

As I try to resist Rose’s superhuman strength, Snow smiles reassuringly toward me. “Oh, there’s nothing to worry about. While orcs in the Demon Lord’s Army can speak the common tongue, wild orcs can only speak barbarian languages. You can’t actually converse with them, so you can eat them without guilt.”

What? No, that’s not the issue here!

“Alice, help! They’re trying to make me eat orc!”

“Relax. I’ve checked the composition. It’s quality protein. It’s not poisonous, either. You’ll be fine.”

I’m saying I can’t eat intelligent life!

“You usually eat worse at the bar! Why are you suddenly so squeamish about eating orc *now*?”

“That’s right, Boss. You usually devour things even I struggle with! Orcs are nothing in comparison!”

Wait, what? “W-wait, what do I usually eat? What the heck is so bad even Rose struggles with it?” I ask reflexively, opening my mouth.

Snow takes the moment to press the orc to my lips. “Here, I’ll feed it to you. Say ahh...”

“Stop! I can’t do orc! Gaaaah! At least feed me the shoulder instead of the head!”

[Desert Crossing: Day Three]

We've switched over to taking shelter from the sun during the day with our tent and marching during the cold nights.

So currently we're hiding from the blazing sun.

"Hey, Six. The situation's getting pretty bad. I need you to do something for me," Alice says with a serious expression inside the sweltering tent.

"Go on."

"Go pull down Snow's panties," Alice requests out of the blue.

"What the hell?" I shout at her. "Alice! Get it together! You're the only reliable one in this group!"

"All right, partner. I've got this."

"What? No, you don't 'got this'! Get away from me! Alice, did the heat break you?!"

"Boss, what are you doing in the middle of an emergency? Miss Alice, don't egg him on at a time like this!"

Alice maintains her level expression despite complaints from Snow and Rose. "Listen carefully. Each time Six does an evil act, he gets points in response. And with those points in hand..."

""""Ohhh!""""

Of course. Why didn't I think of this before? It's not like I have to limit my villainy to the city. There's a perfect target right here.

I turn to face Snow and say with a serious expression. "You must be hot. I'll help you out of your clothes."

"Go to hell!"

As I try to forcefully strip her, Snow draws her swords and drops into a stance.

"Could you not do that in this crowded tent? Please, Boss, Miss Snow, calm down! Let's save it until we're out of options!"

We manage to calm the situation temporarily thanks to Rose's desperate attempts to restrain us, but...

"I feel like we're out of options as it is... Besides, it's not like Snow and I haven't engaged in friendly groping or underwear grabbing in the past."

"Shut up! Stop talking! Besides, if things get that desperate, I shouldn't be the only sacrifice! We'll draw lots! Rose, you're taking part, of course."

"What?!"

Watching our argument from the side, Alice gestures me over.

"...?" I approach, puzzled, and Alice jerks her thumb toward the sleeping Grimm's skirt.

.....

<Evil Points Acquired>

“S-Six! You’re not going to—?! That’s low... That’s too much for me...!”

“B-Boss... That’s awful...”

“N-no you have the wrong— I’m only doing this because Alice told me to...!”

Snow and Rose stare coldly at me as I hike up Grimm’s skirt.

[Desert Crossing: Day Four]

There aren't many monsters around the desert at night.

We're starting to have trouble finding food, but I still can't stomach orc.

I tried to replenish my Evil Points by hiking up Grimm's skirt again, but apparently sexually harassing a woman who's no longer breathing isn't considered villainy, it's just *really* messed up.

For a moment, I suspect that Astaroth's watching us from far away, back on Earth.

Sigh. I guess I'll hike up the skirts of the conscious ones.

[Desert Crossing: Day Five]

We didn't run into any monsters today, either.

Snow glances over at me, as if she has something she wants to say.

Rose looks at me with a different expression.

Actually, in Rose's case, she's not just looking at me, but occasionally casts a glance at the unmoving Grimm.

Oh, come on, if you have something to say, just say it already.

Damn, I'm hungry. I could probably even eat orc now.

I remember that I was able to get equipment despite ending up with a negative point balance. I try it again, but don't get anything this time.

What's the deal? I was able to get an advance last time.

I still can't shake the feeling Astaroth's behind this.

I'm gonna use her to farm Evil Points when I get back to Earth.

[Desert Crossing: Day Six]

Snow asks why I wasn't hiking up Grimm's skirt.

She says because it's an emergency, she'll let it pass, then turns to look outside the tent.

Wow, she just sold out Grimm.

When I explain I no longer get points for hiking up an unconscious woman's skirt, she states she'll take one for the team.

I try hiking up Snow's skirt, but I don't get any points.

I remember that points don't get added if the target doesn't mind. I ask if she's enjoying having her skirt hiked up, and we almost get into a deathmatch.

Hunger definitely makes your heart shrivel.

Lately, Rose won't even try to stop our fighting. If anything, she starts looking at me as if she hopes something will happen. I feel like I've seen that look before.

Oh. That's right. I remember. That's how the mutant Spider Woman looked at me. She was known for being a man-eater.

I've heard that when people are stuck in a dangerous situation, the survival instincts get stronger, and that leads to an increased libido.

Ah. So that's why Rose looks so dangerous. She's feeling frisky. Relax; I'm feeling that way, too.

Dammit. Tent life is hard. There's no privacy at all.

I try hiking up Grimm's skirt. No points, as expected.

What's the deal with this system?

Actually, I feel like I've heard that point gains are influenced by emotional states.

Is the problem the fact we're currently in an emergency? I think I remember hearing that crimes stop being crimes in life-or-death situations.

Yes, like when you're stranded on a snowy mountain.

Ah, I see. So hiking up Grimm's skirt is no longer considered a crime. Lately, no one even comments when I hike up their skirt.

Snow even occasionally says "Well?" to see if I got any points.

I guess I'm not one to talk, but are you guys really okay with this?

[Desert Crossing: Day Seven]

Our surroundings slowly grow darker, and it's approaching time to start our march.

And we're steadily approaching the very limit of our endurance.

According to Alice, the only chipper one in our group, we're just a few days away from town.

But even with that in mind, I don't have much left in me.

I'm hungry; I want something to eat. I want a cold beer. I'd like some privacy. Even if it's just for five minutes, I want time to myself.

The thoughts cross my mind as we trudge along.

Rose begins chewing on her own tail. It's a bit like how a hungry child sucks on their thumb, and according to Rose it distracts a little bit from the hunger pains.

Remembering how poor she was in the past, I feel a twinge of sadness, but when I ask her if the tail will regrow like a lizard's, she appears to start seriously contemplating the option.

So far, I guess I'm still okay with my armor's temperature adjuster. Rose, too, is evidently tolerant against the heat and cold. And, of course, Alice is just fine.

There's already one that's past saving, but I'd like to think she'll be okay, given that Alice sprayed her with preservative.

Which leaves us with Snow.

I look at Snow, who seems desperate, and steel myself as I open my mouth to speak.

5

"This is an emergency. I'm gonna strip you."

"Just try it. I can't take much more of this, either. Bring it on."

She must be at her limit, too. She stares at me with a ruthless expression, drawing her sword and taking a perfect stance.

The hunger must have enhanced her senses; she gives off a more intimidating aura than usual.

"Listen carefully, Snow. At this rate we're all gonna die. If you'll just let me have my way for a little bit, the Evil Points will see to it that your hunger is sated, and I'll be sated in a different way, too. Everyone goes home happy. Come on, it's a win-win."

"My mind may be at its limit, but I can still recognize a scam as

obvious as that.” Still, Snow’s expression looks conflicted.

“You don’t want to die, either, do you? You want to eat till you’re full, right?” I whisper, but Rose is the one who answers.

“Yes I do!”

“I’m not talking to you right now... How about it, Snow? Right now, I’ll even throw in a rare item. Remember what you said the other day? You have a good contact who’ll flip magic items, don’t you? You need money, right? All you have to do put up with me for a little bit, and you can pay off your sword loans.”

“Umm...”

As the internal conflict plays out on Snow’s face, Alice is busy picking the grains of sand out of her shotgun. “What’s there to think about?” she says. “You were eager to give yourself to that Engel guy.”

“There was something wrong with me then! The lure of getting the wealth of a rich country had me under its spell! And that time if something had happened, he would’ve taken responsibility like he was supposed to. But now...” Snow casts a meaningful glance my way.

“I hate those words. *Taking responsibility.*”

“You idiot scumbag, can’t you see I’m trying to convince her?” Alice snaps at me.

As I turn back to Snow and drop into a stance—

Snow, reaching her limit, suddenly collapses.

“S-seriously?! Grimm’s enough of a pain to carry. I don’t know if moving on while carrying you is even an option!”

“U-ugh... I—I can’t... No more...” Suffering from a lack of sleep and severe hunger in a hostile environment, she can no longer even stand.

“Six, now’s your chance. Get her while she’s still conscious.”

“B-but...that’s gotta be crossing several lines...”

I know it’s a bit hypocritical given how eager I was to get my hands on her, but going after a woman who’s too weak to resist is just too much.

Just then...

“B-Boss! I...I can’t resist any longer...” Rose’s voice is ragged. Her cheeks are red, maybe from the desert heat.

“R-Rose? W-wait; it’s too early for you. This is Snow’s area. Pervy things are kind of her department, especially since her personality makes it hard to feel guilty for putting her through it...” I can’t help but hesitate, even though Rose’s unexpected intervention should have made me happy.

Had it been Snow or Grimm, I wouldn’t have batted an eye, but...

“But I can’t take it anymore...”

At Rose's expression of pained longing, my restraint heads straight out the door.

Right, we're both at our limit.

Alice has been watching us with interest, but I need her to wander outside for a bit.

"All right. I'm sorry," I tell her. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. It's just that you surprised me."

"Don't apologize for embarrassing me... I'm fully aware this is a line we shouldn't cross, but..."

Oh.

Yes, she's right.

We belong to the same squadron.

This isn't about men or women. It's a matter of life or death.

If we cross this line it could impact future missions. There'll be awkward moments to spare going forward.

But still...

"Rose, it's an emergency. Don't sweat the small stuff. When you get down to it, it's just primal instinct. There's nothing wrong with feeling this way in extreme circumstances."

Yes, this is a libido born of survival instinct. It's like when you randomly get hard after pulling an all-nighter.

Rose repeats what I said, as if to convince herself. "Primal instinct... There's nothing wrong with it in an emergency..."

"Right. It's one of the three primal urges! It's no crime if you can't resist it!"

At my declaration she smiles as though she's made her peace with something.

"Thank you. I feel better about it! It can't be helped given the circumstances, can it?"

"That's right. It can't be helped! If there's one problem, it's that it's based on mutual consent." If it's consensual, I won't get any Evil Points.

"Huh? What's wrong if it's consensual?"

"E-erm, if you put it so bluntly, I don't see a problem with it... And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't flattered at being desired. Guess you're quite the man-eater despite your cute face."

Rose's cheeks flush. "D-do you dislike carnivores?"

"Not at all! In fact, I say bring them on. But still, if we're to save everyone, we can't both just jump right in. The necessity is important."

I need her to show some resistance to the idea, or I won't get any Evil Points.

Rose nods once. "It's the laws of nature, right? It's fine. It'll reduce my sense of guilt, too. Please, resist with all your might, Boss."

“Guilt...? Wait? I’m the one being pounced on? I mean, I don’t mind that. Actually, I love it, but...”

I can’t help but hesitate at Rose’s assertiveness. Still, I can’t back down when she’s being this forward.

No, I’ve made young Rose say all these things. I need to man up.

“Besides, I’ve wanted to go all out against you, Boss. I don’t think there’ll be many opportunities to do so outside of situations like this, so please don’t hold anything back!”

“You’re okay with me going all out? I thought I would be gentle, but if that’s what you want...” I’m a little uneasy about throwing the full force of my raging libido at this young woman...

But it’s time for me to pull it together. I can’t leave her hanging when she’s this determined.

“All right. Just let me wipe down my body with a wet towel.” It’s the least I can do.

“I’m sorry, Boss, but I don’t think I can hold back any longer... Besides, you’re fine as is, Boss. Um... I’ve been thinking this for a while, but you smell pretty good, Boss...”

“I s-smell good? Damn, you’re aggressive today! If you’re okay with that, I’m fine with it, but isn’t it a little too...kinky?” I feel my cheeks flushing and pace quickening at everything this young woman is saying.

Still. The only thing left to do is make our move.

I look to Alice, trying to give her a hint. She just continues watching with amusement. “Rose, Six,” she says. “I want to ask you two a question. What are you two planning to do now?”

“I’m gonna jump her bones and devour her.”

“I’m going to eat the boss!”

Both of us blush after our similar declarations.

Alice looks at us flatly. “You two sound like you’re talking about the same thing, but you’re not.” She still seemed very entertained.

“I’m gonna do pervy stuff with Rose, right?”

“I’m going to fight the boss, right?”

.....

“Wait, what? Fighting? That’s a little too intense as foreplay for me.”

“Wait, what are you saying, Boss? When you win the fight for survival in nature, you eat the loser.”

.....

“When you say eat, you mean sexually, right?”

“No, I mean literally. I’m going to eat you.”

.....

“What the hell?! That’s not even funny! I’ve met a lot of messed-up mutants in my day, but that’s a step too far, even for me!”

“What are you talking about, Boss?! You were the one who said it was one of the three primal urges and that it was useless to resist.”

“I did say that. Yes, I did say that!”

But that’s definitely not what I meant. I mean, yeah, that’s one of the three primal urges, too, but that’s really, really not what I meant!

Rose appears to be at her limit, and her gaze looks really, really dangerous.

“Boss, this is an emergency. We don’t have time to worry about this!”

“I said that, too, but that’s also not what I meant! We’ll get back to town in a few more days. Just hang on!”

The people on this planet are fine with eating intelligent life like orcs.

Which means...

Rose’s cheeks flush and she squirms.

“I can’t hold on any longer, Boss... I was really happy to hear you didn’t hate someone who might eat you...”

“Words really are hard to use right. I guess this is the culture gap in action!”

This is completely different from the “man-eater” definition I know! I back away toward the tent entrance, trying my best not to draw more of Rose’s attention than necessary.

Rose watches me with predatory eyes. “Boss, you smell so good...”



“Yeah, circumstances really *are* important. The line’s pretty close to what she said earlier, but now my pulse is racing for a completely different reason...”

Her cheeks flush a faint shade of pink again. “Boss, have you heard of the suspension bridge effect? Maybe that’s love...”

“That’s true. This racing heartbeat might be love! All right, come at me! I’ve made my peace! I’ll take you down!” An evil minion can’t afford to be afraid of a little girl like her!

“Grandpa used to say, ‘when people fall in love, they want to become one with their opponent...’”

“Your grandpa was right, but you’re misunderstanding what he wanted to tell you.” I correct her as I drop into a fighting stance.

“Well then, I’ll leave the two of you to it.”

I watch as Alice steps out of the tent.

“I bet we were fated to have this battle before we were even born... Rose, Battle Chimera for the kingdom of Grace! Prepare yourself!”

“Combat Agent Six, Kisaragi Corporation! Prepare to give up some points!”

In a tent in a desert far, far away, a heated night begins!

<Massive Amounts of Evil Points Acquired>

“Ah. Cheer up, Six,” Alice calls out happily. “We can see it in the distance.”

“.....”

I let out a sigh, unable to muster the will to respond.

I’m sitting in the passenger seat of the brand-new buggy. “<Hey, Alice. I really wanna to go back to Earth.>”

“<What are you talking about? You seemed to have a lot of fun last night. It got us a new buggy. Cheer up!>”

.....

“<Fun?! *Fun?!!* Don’t be ridiculous. We didn’t go all the way. That was foreplay at most!>”

“<Eh, you say that, but you earned a nice amount of points. Good work. You should make this a regular thing with Rose.>”

Last night I fought Rose, who had gone completely off the rails. I took advantage of little openings here and there to earn some points, then used the points earned during the battle to order some food, then used that as bait to neutralize Rose...

“<But damn, Chimeras are pretty scary. She gave me a run for my money.>”

“<Fascinating, isn’t it? It really makes investigating the planet’s

ancient ruins all the more important. >”

I glance over at the back seat, seeing the three of them slumped and out cold. There isn't a trace of sex appeal left.

“<Still, can't say we succeeded in the mission Tillis gave us. We only got one of those weird fruits, and even then, we used a good chunk of the water. And I want to send this off to Kisaragi for study. Its ability to absorb liquid would be really handy if we can find alternative uses for it.>”

“<Damn, I'd forgotten about the mission...>” I can't help but dread what comes next.

The kingdom of Grace comes into view, and there's something off about it.

It reminds me of the time the Demon Lord's Army was about to attack...

6

“It appears Toris and the Demon Lord's Army have joined forces and are preparing to invade.”

Alice and I are summoned to the castle immediately after our return and given the news without so much as a cursory “welcome back.”

While we were busy getting lost in the desert, it appears they'd finished their invasion preparations.

“I see. So you'd like to borrow my power, right? Well, fighting is my job after all. However, Mr. Six's help doesn't come cheap.”

“Have you forgotten you were the primary cause of this war?” Tillis stares flatly at me.

“I'm not the type to dwell on the past. I don't even remember much about the past.”

“That impressive, Six, given that this all started only a week ago.”

I ignore Alice's comment while Tillis sighs.

“Under the circumstances, we don't have many options. However, we need you to take responsibility for your actions, Sir Six.”

“I really hate the words *take responsibility*.”

“It truly is refreshing to see you constantly outdo yourself on the ‘I'm a piece of shit’ scale,” Alice interjects again, “but you're making the conversation take longer, so shut up for a bit.”

Tillis twitches her brow, but patiently continues speaking. “Thanks to the presence of the Combat Agents dispatched by the Kisaragi Corporation, we're roughly on par with the Demon Lord's

Army. Unfortunately, with Toris on the enemy side, we can't win a prolonged conflict. We still have to solve the issue of water..."

"You know, Tillis, if you'd just get in front of the populace and—"

"Based on your report, it appears you failed to secure enough water for our farming needs! Our kingdom is at risk if this continues! We will continue searching for my father, but I would like to ask you to undertake a specific mission!" Tillis interrupts me, taking out a single map.

"This is the map to the ruins that would have been your payment had the mission to Toris succeeded. I'm told two of the Demon Lord's Army lords are currently exploring these ruins...?"

Oh yeah, kind of got lost in all that hubbub, but that's why Heine and Russell were in Toris, wasn't it?

"Yep, apparently there's some sort of powerful ancient weapon inside. They were planning to use it to beat the Sand King," I reply.

Tillis nods. "I'd like to have the two of you head to those ruins."

"...So you want us to stop them from acquiring the ancient weapon?"

We have no idea what that weapon might be, but Heine seemed awfully sure of its power.

I have to admit, I'm not keen on just letting the enemy have it, but...

Just then...

"<Hey, Six. We need to take this mission. Otherwise we're screwed.>"

"<Pretty unusual for you to insist like this. You worried about the ancient weapon?>"

Tillis appears surprised by Alice's sudden remarks in Japanese, but she remains silent, watching us converse.

"<Remember that weird glass case in Toris? It was empty. There just happened to be a member of the Demon Lord's Army leadership who was familiar with both the ancient ruins and the case. Does any of this sound fishy to you?>" Alice's tone is more serious than usual, and my mouth suddenly goes dry.

I gulp. "<...You mean there's tons of those glass cases in the ancient ruins, and they're mass producing beautiful female homunculi?>"

"<No, you idiot... That brat, Russell. He seemed awfully familiar with the ancient ruins. I think he was probably the one originally in that case. Think about it; he was awfully angry when you tried to hit the thing. Almost like he was trying to protect something that was important to him.>"

Now that she mentions it, I do remember that.

"< There's a chance that he's an artificial Chimera made long ago, just like Rose. And unlike Rose, he still remembers the past. If he's saying that he can beat the Sand King with the ancient weapon... Rose the combat Chimera was able to hold her own with you. Now think of someone like that with a really powerful weapon... > "

"< Well, there goes our local business! > "

I finally grasp the situation after Alice's explanation. The reason the Kisaragi Corporation's Combat Agents can handle the Demon Lord's Army is because we have the advantage of modern weapons. That means we'll be in a world of trouble if they get their hands on some high-tech weaponry of their own.

From my exclamation and shocked expression, Tillis judges that I've realized something and resumes speaking. "I don't know exactly what you were talking about, but it appears you've come to a decision."

"Yup, this is a problem for us, too. We'll go ahead and completely annihilate that weapon for you."

I nod to Tillis, whose expression softens in return.

"Thank you. Hopefully we can solve all this before the water crisis becomes unsolvable..."

"Well, the water issue could be solved with your help, if you'd just cooperate."

Yes, if only she'd say a certain phrase in front of the masses...

"I'm afraid I simply don't have the power... With my magical ability and skill level, I can only summon a water spirit for a short period. So unfortunately..."

"No, that's not it. We're not expecting you to do anything with your magic. You just need to chant that phrase in front of everyone."

Tillis completely ignores me. "Very well, Sir Six, Miss Alice! Please do everything in your power to destroy the ancient weapon!"

"Hey, wait a minute. You told me earlier to take responsibility. Then, Tillis, you need to take responsibility as a member of the royal family. All you have to do is chant one simple phrase."

Tillis avoids my gaze as I stare at her. Just then...

"Wait, let's not destroy the weapon. We can just take it for ourselves."

...the evil organization's android proposes an extremely rational alternative.

Returning to the hideout, we update Tiger Man on the situation.

“So we’ll leave defending this country up to you, Tiger Man. We’ll go infiltrate the ruins in Toris.”

“Mrrrr. That’s not fairrrr. I wanna go, too...”

We’re sitting in the room marked CONFERENCE ROOM in the hideout. Tiger Man lets out a disappointed purr.

Infiltrate the ancient ruins and take the weapon our rivals are trying to claim, then use that weapon to conquer Toris. That’s the plan Alice has come up with.

Currently, while the Demon Lord’s Army is advancing aggressively toward the city, Toris has been cautiously making progress.

If the enemy gets their hands on the ancient weapon, the situation would become dramatically worse for us.

If our squad members weren’t still recovering, I would have preferred to leave right away.

Alice takes out a map. “The ruins in Toris are here. We’ll follow Russell’s group as they survey the interior of the ruins. There’s likely to be defenses and traps inside the ruins, so we’ll let them deal with those. We can then attack them when they reach the last room and grab the weapon away from them.”

““Solid plan,”” Tiger Man and I say in unison.

Let the enemy struggle through the combat and traps toward the objective. The moment they get to the end and let their guard down, attack them.

A wonderful plan, the very model of an evil scheme.

“Tiger Man, you’ve forgotten to purr out your words.”

“It’s just us right now, so who cares? Still, following a group around the ruins would be a bit difficult given my size. Frrrine. I’ll stay home and guarrrd this.”

Tiger Man bats his tail from side to side as Alice places a rock on top of the map.

“Your job isn’t going to be any easier, Tiger Man. Your job is to stall the Demon Lord’s Army that’s likely to come from this direction. If they get through, Toris’s army will probably follow them. If we succeed in acquiring the weapon, we can force them into a hostage situation disguised as negotiations. If we can’t, we’ll end up getting dragged into an all-out war between two countries. It’s an important job; we’re counting on you.”

“This ambush point, it’s woodland. I’m the king of the jungle, Tigerrr Man. I can win a defensive battle in a forrrest with my eyes closed.”

“Damn, Tiger Man! You’re both creepy and awesome when you’re purring words like that!”

Mutants Chameleon Man and Tiger Man.

Their sexual fetishes and personalities are rather questionable, but they're Kisaragi's two best when it comes to woodland fighting.

Alice turns her gaze to Tiger Man and me. "Good. Well, it's time to head back to Toris. The leadership of the Demon Lord's Army is still there. I'm sure the kingdom itself is pretty busy and confused with war preparations, but they probably want to finish the survey quickly."

Alice lifts her fist into the air.

"We're an evil organization. Let's get them right where we want them, then swipe the glory out from under them!"

""Wooooo!"

We let out a cheer and bump our fists together.

[Status Report]

Started a war with a neighboring kingdom over a difference in cultural values.

It appears popular Japanese party tricks are considered offensive in countries with no sense of humor.

Speaking of differences in cultural values, “man-eater” types on this planet are much more aggressive than those on Earth.

I almost wound up getting eaten, but I managed to avoid being carried away by the heat of the moment and resisted crossing any lines.

I believe anyone else would have been eaten under the same circumstances.

Considering the circumstances of this last mission, I hereby propose teleporting water and food supplies in the event of an emergency.

It’s a matter of life or death, so please seriously consider this proposal.

Reporting Operative:

Combat Agent 6, Super Attractive to Man-Eaters



Brainy Partner, Brawny Partner

1

The next day.

The three had sufficiently recovered from their near-death experience, so I explained our new mission to them—

“Sob... Sniff... Sob... Bwaaaaah...”

Currently, we’ve piled into the new buggy, and with Alice at the wheel, we’re heading back toward Toris across the evening plains.

After listening to my explanation, Rose, sitting in the back seat, looks at me with a faintly exasperated expression. “To head right back to Toris after doing that to their royalty... I have to admit, Boss, there are times when I’m pretty sure you’re just dumb.”

“For all your cuteness, you have some real zingers sometimes. And you’re a man-eater, to boot.”

Snow’s sitting in the passenger seat up front, while the rest of us are in the back.

Grimm was so excited about the buggy’s speed last time, but I think something snapped in her brain when she got mummified. She’s sitting on the seat clutching her knees, muttering something under her breath.

And then...

“Sob... Sniff... Bwaaaaah... Sniff... My pay... My salary...”

“Hey, Six. Do something about her. She’s getting on my nerves.”

Snow, sitting in the passenger seat, has been sobbing continually.

Because we failed our water fruit-collection mission, it appears she got a pay cut in addition to her demotion.

“...Sheesh. Hey, Snow, there’s nothing you can do now about the

reduced pay, right? I mean, look at me. I always use up my money the week I get paid. Yet, I manage to enjoy my life. There's more to life than money."

"The reason you're enjoying life is because I give you an allowance."

"Y-you get an allowance from a childlike Alice...? That's low, even by your standards..."

Great. I try to cheer her up, and instead, I get a guilt trip.

"But this pay cut hurts. Too much, really... I was hoping to buy a replacement for my poor frost blade that perished in battle with Heine..." Snow begins to tear up again.

"Okay, fine," Alice mutters in annoyance. "Snow, if you're useful during this mission, I'll give you an allowance. And if we manage to acquire a certain object from those ruins, I'll pay you a bonus worth three months your salary. How about it?"

"Sweet Lady Aliiiiiice!"

I think we're starting to get a good idea of how to deal with her.

Snow clings Alice, who is still driving and pushes her aside with a look of exasperation. "The goal this time is infiltration. So keep your temper in check."

"Of course, Lady Alice! I, Snow, swear to be of use to you." Despite the fact that she was criticizing me for the same thing a moment earlier, Snow flips her attitude entirely.

"Hey, how deep do your sins run? Just what did you do in your previous life to end up this way? What sort of life does someone have to live to become like you?"

"Oh, shut up. You're one to talk, getting an allowance from Lady Alice. Money is the most important thing in the world. If it's for money, I'll toss aside colleagues, acquaintances, hell, even my parents, whose faces I've never seen."

"Sorry to interrupt you as you reach a record-breaking low, but stop calling me Lady Alice."

You know, I'm starting to feel this gold digger is better suited to Kisaragi than I am.

Hoping to avoid any further involvement with her, I turn my gaze to the carnivorous Chimera sitting next to me chewing on a piece of jerky.

"Say, Rose. Do you really not remember what happened in the desert?"

"This again, Boss? Like I've said before, I don't remember a thing. I remember being so hungry that I was about to faint. Then when I came to, I was sleeping in a bed at the castle. Besides, there's no way I'd attack you, Boss. Orcs are as far as I go when it comes to food."

Yes, she claims she doesn't remember attacking me.

The moment she woke up, I tried to force her to apologize for trying to eat me...

"And if what you said is true, Boss, you did a bunch of things to me, too. Um, what did you actually do?"

"...If you don't remember, then it's best to let it go. I got a little enjoyment out of it."

"Boss, what did you do to me?! I won't be mad, so please tell me. Depending on what it is, you need to take responsibility for it!" Rose grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me.

"I don't like the words..."

"*Taking responsibility*, I know! How awful! I don't know why, but those words stick out in my memory!"

Why does she remember *that* of all things?

"<Hey, Alice. Are we sure she's safe to bring along? I don't want to anyone taking a bite out of me during the mission.>"

"<Nothing came up when I examined her. Chimeras are weird life-forms, so I can't say how they differ from humans. Still, it should be all right if we avoid making her hungry. Make sure you keep her fed.>" Alice sounds unconcerned, but being the one who was almost eaten, I can't quite get over my anxiety.

Noticing that we started a conversation in Japanese, Snow draws closer to us.

"...You know, I didn't want to bring this up before, but every time you two break into your native language, you're plotting something, aren't you? Hey, Six. I'm not like those inflexible knights you know. I'm a woman who can accept the good with the bad. So as long as you two aren't planning to betray Princess Tillis, I can help you with your schemes."

I can't quite believe what I'm hearing out of her and give her a look.

Snow then misinterprets the look, shaking her head. "Don't say it, I know what you're thinking. That it's not the sort of thing a knight should be saying, much less the former captain of the Royal Guard. That the people's hero, Lady Snow, should be above reproach."

"Not at all."

Snow doesn't let my remark deter her, and she dramatically forms her hand into a fist. "However, I'm a true patriot! So long as it brings prosperity to the kingdom of Grace, I care not what happens to other countries, nor do I care what evils I must engage in. So, Six, Alice, confide in me. You've said you're investigating these ruins, but what are you planning to do? Come now, give me a bite of the apple. I won't ask for a cut. Just so long as you let a little of the gains trickle down to me." Snow has the eyes of one who has completely succumbed to their greed, and she smiles at us, still operating under

her mistaken assumptions. "What riches await in the ruins in Toris? You said you'd pay a bonus if we acquire a certain object. What is this object? Is it treasure? If it is, I'd be willing to look the other way while you skim a bit off the top for yourselves."

Ah, so it looks like she thinks we're going after a buried treasure, and she's proposing we keep some of it instead of giving it all to Tillis.

"<Hey, Alice, should we just recruit her into Kisaragi? I think she's got potential as an evil minion.>"

"<I don't really get the sense Snow is evil. She reminds me of you, actually. She's nothing more than an underhanded lackey. She's the sort who fails because she lets her greed get the better of her.>"

As we engage in another conversation in Japanese, Snow makes more mistaken assumptions, smiling over at us cheerfully.

Whatever happened to the proud, compassionate knight who risked her life fighting the enemy and came to beg for my help to save Rose and Grimm during the Demon Lord's Army's invasion? The beautiful young woman kissed me and said she'd consider going out with me, then smiled shyly...

"Well? Have you come to a decision? Don't worry, I know where we can dispose of any goods of questionable provenance. There's a shop that handles that sort of thing in the slums. Heh-heh... How about it? I think it's a good deal for all of us..."

Looking at this woman and her scheming smile, I accept that the Snow from that time is gone. "To make sure we're on the same page: The thing in the ruins isn't treasure. It's a weapon of some sort."

"Now, there's no need to be so cautious, Six. It's between us. We've exchanged a kiss. You can trust me," Snow whispers to me, despite the fact that she's not believing me when I'm telling her the truth.

...Man, this chick is a pain in the ass!

2

I wonder how long it's been since that conversation.

The road is now pitch black, since the sun set hours ago, and Alice is driving with the buggy's lights off, hoping to avoid a repeat of the antlion encounter in the desert. An android equipped with night vision is really useful at times like this.

After some time driving and staring into the darkness, Alice narrows her eyes.

"We should be getting close to the ruins. I can see some lights. That's most likely our competition's camp."

I turn to look in the same direction, seeing a small light off in the distance. As we approach, slowing down, the lights eventually reveal an enormous building.

“...Whoa. That’s big.”

It looks about the size of the Tokyo Dome, and it’s definitely out of place compared to the rest of this world’s culture.

I couldn’t help commenting on it, and Alice seems impressed as well.

“Huh, looks like there might be something to this ancient civilization stuff. Hey, Six, if it’s a civilization that can build something like this, the ancient weapon might actually be pretty useful.”

“And of course that ancient weapon’s gonna go berserk and try to kill us when we go to claim it, right? I’ve seen this sort of thing a million times.”

We park the buggy in right where we are to avoid being noticed by the demons and take the time to discuss our next moves.

“It’d be best to finish our survey at night. Otherwise, you won’t be able to make much use of my powerful gifts,” the nocturnal Grimm says, energized by nightfall.

“I’m not going to deny the existence of your abilities like Alice, but I can’t remember the last time your supernatural abilities did us any good. Is there anything useful about you at all?”

“W-wait just a minute! I’m Archbishop Grimm! When the odds are slim, look to Grimm!”

Grimm’s been little better than baggage lately, so here’s hoping she has an opportunity to shine.

Snow appears to finish her observations of the lights off in the distance. “So about our next move... I doubt they’re expecting us to return so soon after our escape from Toris. So...I’m going to propose we do something a little underhanded.” She smiles deviously. “No doubt they’ve let their guard down. After all, we’re in the middle of the kingdom of Toris. The only thing they need to worry about is feral monsters. Therefore, instead of investigating the ruins, why don’t we just attack them during the—”

“Miss Snow, I think you’re taking a little too much inspiration from Boss lately.”

“Say, Snow, unlike Rose and me, aren’t you supposed to be a proper knight? I mean, I know they’re our enemy, but attacking enemies while they sleep? That seems a little much...”

Snow trembles a little in the darkness as Rose and Grimm shoot down her proposal.

“W-we don’t have much choice! There are two of the Demon

Lord's Elite Four over there! Six! Alice! You understand, right? This is a good plan! I mean, you two came up with things like attacking defenseless supply convoys and clearing out the Tower of Duster with that ridiculous tactic! This is right up your alley! Right? You agree with me, don't you?"

Snow looks desperately to us for support...

"Hey, Snow, who do you think I am? Kisaragi operatives can't resort to something so lame."

"Well said, Six. You're a model Kisaragi operative."

Snow's eyes widen in surprise at our sudden betrayal.

"W-wait! I was trying to learn from the tactics we've been using and adapt to your way of thinking...!" Snow desperately tries to put forth excuses.

We look over at her, shaking our heads with a sigh.

"Did you hear that, Alice? She claims she's trying to adopt our way of thinking. Seems she doesn't have a very high opinion of Kisaragi."

"Indeed. Six, now's the time to give her the truth. No sugarcoating anything."

At the barrage of criticism, Snow's eyes begin to well up with tears.

"We're going to rest until morning, then follow them into the ruins. We'll let them take care of the traps and security mechanisms. Once they overcome all the obstacles and reach their destination, they'll be worn out. The moment they let their guard down at the objective, *that's* when we'll strike. We've thought this out very carefully. And you'd have us throw it all away for something as lame as a night attack? Eesh."

"Well said, Six. Spoken like a proper Kisaragi operative."

Alice and I nod at each other. As Snow begins to throw a tantrum, we ignore her and go to bed.

3

The next morning...

"Six, do you plan to sleep all day? Get up! I don't see them. Looks like they've gone into the ruins!"

Snow's yelling wakes me as I lay sleeping inside the buggy.

"What the hell? It's too early in the morning for all that yelling... It's easier to follow them if we give them a nice head start..."

"I don't care; get up! What if they get to the treasure before we

do?!”

I keep telling her we're not here for any treasure, but it's just not getting through to her.

Thanks to Snow's excited urging, we quickly finish breakfast and set off after Heine and company.

The entrance to the ruins, ordinarily sealed, is wide open, which I suspect is the result of Russell's handiwork. A cautious glance into the ruins shows a thick layer of dust carpeting the floor. The ruins have been untouched for a long time.

“Look at this, Alice. We've been in a fantasy world all this time, but now it's getting all sci-fi-ish.”

In fact, the lights in various parts of the ruins are still working. The walls and corridors, made of some unknown material, give the whole place a distinctly cyberpunk vibe.

“There's definitely something odd about this planet's culture level. It makes more sense to assume there was an advanced civilization in the past and that what we see now is a post-collapse society. Really, when you think about it...” Alice glances over at Rose, prompting me to do the same.

“Wh-what is it? Why are you looking at me like that?!”

Ah, I see. “She's not exactly a product of natural evolution, is she?”

“Right. This planet's ecosystems are all out of whack, but Rose takes that to the next level.”

“I don't know what it is you two are talking about. But that's pretty rude!”

I look to Rose and put my index finger to my lips in a hushing gesture. Kneeling, I use my jaw to point out a set of footprints in the dust. “Look, tracks. It shouldn't be too hard to follow them... So with that said, hey, Snow.”

Snow walks over.

“Strip.”

“Seems you're still in that desert mindset. Fine. I'll kill you before I deal with Heine.”

A single word is enough to send Snow nearly over the edge.

“I'm saying you need to take off that armor. You clank when you walk. You need to take this more seriously.”

“Grr... F-fine. Give me a moment...”

As if in protest, Grimm uses her toes to lightly back away in her wheelchair.

“No, we're not doing something as ridiculous as exploring ruins with a wheelchair. We're screwed the moment we run into some stairs. Stand up!”

“Nooooo! And here I'd sworn I'd never get up from it again after

burning my soles on the desert sand.”

Ignoring Grimm’s protests, we force her to start walking on her own feet.

Alice frowns at us. “A little quieter please, you meatheads. Are you *trying* to give away our presence? Once you’re prepared, we’re going to catch up to them before they reach their goal... What is it, Rose?”

Alice turns her attention toward Rose, who has been tilting her head with a puzzled expression and glancing around the interior of the ruins.

“No, it’s nothing... This is supposed to be different from the ruins they found me in, but the shape and patterns of the wall feel familiar, like I’ve seen them before...”

These ruins have been sealed up until very recently. That means it’s safe to assume that if she’s seen these walls before, Rose is a product of this ancient civilization...

Suddenly...

As we’re enjoying the feeling of adventure that comes with exploring an ancient ruin, we hear Snow grinding her teeth together.

“Grr...! It won’t budge...!”

“Miss Snow! What are you doing?! You can’t just pull off the lighting!”

It looks like Snow’s convinced herself the lights would be worth good money, so she’s trying to remove the lights embedded in the walls.

How far does she intend to fall anyway?

“...Hey, Alice, are you sure we shouldn’t just leave her here?”

“...Well, I already told her I’d pay her a bonus if she was useful...”

4

The interior of the ruins appears to be arranged as a single path.

There’s a large number of side rooms along the way, and there’s debris from something inside each room.

“Hey, Alice, these have gotta be robots, right? They don’t look like anything else.”

“They haven’t fared very well over the years, but yeah. They’re robots.”

They must have been security robots. The remains are scattered like mileposts, and as a result, our exploration was...

“Wait, Six. If we can take these home, they’ll be worth—”

“No, put those down. We’re never going to catch up to them at

this rate! You can come back for this crap later!”

...not going well. We're not making much progress thanks to Snow's greed. She's convinced herself that the remains have some value.

“Alice, tell her to stop screwing around. If you threaten not to pay her the bonus...”

“Fascinating. I wonder what powers them... Hmm? What is it, Six? You look dumber than usual with your mouth hanging open like that.”

...Not you, too!

Now that I'm aware of it, I notice that Alice is poking around, too, touching things here and there.

Just then, Rose steps up to the inert remains of a robot, tilting her head curiously.

“What is it? Are *you* interested in these things, too?”

“...No. At least I don't think so. But I feel like I played with these kids a long time ago...” Rose places her hand on the robot's chest, making an interesting observation in a hushed voice. And at that moment...

Something like a voice rings out from the faint darkness in front of us, followed by a bright red flash of light.

We look at one another and nod, quietly moving forward toward the source of the sound.

As we move forward, we eventually find...

Heine and Russell kneeling in front of a security robot that's recently been reduced to a hunk of junk.

“This has been pretty exhausting, but seems we're getting close. Looks like you've used a fair bit of magic, Russell. Are you sure you don't need to rest?”

“I'm fine. Chimeras basically have unlimited magic. So long as we don't run out of food, I can cast water spells all day if I need to.”

We watch as Heine and Russell stand there and chat without anything resembling a sense of urgency. That probably means they just finished fighting the robot. Thanks to Heine's flames, the ambient temperature's pretty high, and I feel sweat beading on my forehead.

Still, I'm pretty sure he just said “Chimera.” Alice suspected they were related to these ruins. Looks like her theory's correct.

“All right, let's just wrap this up, then,” says Heine. “I'm tired of camping. I want to get out of this creepy place and get a good night's sleep back at the castle.”

“Creepy, huh? This place reminds me of home, actually... But I guess you would feel uneasy; you're a modern demon used to your

modern environment.” Russell’s comment piques my interest, right now it’s more important to keep following them.

I signal to the rest of the group, sneakily following the two to find the perfect moment to strike.

“Heine, a new guardian’s approaching us from that hallway! Leave this one to me! Take care of the other one!”

“On it. I’ll burn it away with my flames! Geez, there’s a lot of these things!”

Well, these two aren’t members of the Elite Four for nothing. They destroy the security robots without much risk to themselves, quickly pushing farther into the ruins.

“Damn, a trap! You all right, Russell? Not hurt, are you?”

“I’m fine, thanks to you. But now you’re hurt! Show me your wound; I’ll heal you!”

Triggering traps, getting hurt.

“It’s just a scratch. Besides, we can’t have you getting hurt. Defeating the Sand King is the long-awaited dream of all demons. You’re the only one who can do it.”

“Heine... You’re right. I have to do this, for everyone. I can’t afford to die until I complete this mission...”

“Don’t be stupid. I won’t let you die even once you do complete your mission. You’re still a kid. And adults are supposed to protect kids.”

Strengthening their bonds of friendship.

“Treating me like a kid again? Fine! Just watch. I’ll protect you some day, Heine.”

“Heh. Well, that gives me something to look forward to.”

We silently watch all their exchanges...

“*Heh-heh... They don’t have the first clue that we’re here,*” I murmur. “I’m looking forward to reaching the objective.”

So far, they’ve made it really easy to just follow them.

“*...Hey, Six,*” says Snow. “*Watching their efforts makes me hesitant to steal the treasure from them...*”

“*What the hell are you talking about? They’re high-ranking demons. Taking their prize is the right thing to do. Throw that guilt away; it’s useless!*”

Even as I reply, Heine and Russell continue their advance.

“*More importantly, Grimm, can you secretly curse them from over here? Seems they’re both magic users of some sort. How about using a curse to keep them from casting when a security robot attacks them? I bet that’ll put them in a bind.*”

“*I have to talk at a certain volume to cast a curse. Still, it’s a good idea. I’ll give it a try if the opportunity arises.*”

“Boss, I don’t think I can bear it...,” Rose interjects as I discuss the subject of curses with Grimm. She’s been quieter than usual, maybe sympathizing with Russell, a fellow Chimera.

“Rose, get it together. The fate of the kingdom rests with our mission. We can’t afford to lose. Swallow your feelings of guilt and bear it. Once we get home, I’ll buy you lots of tasty food, all right?”

“I meant to comment on this before, but you seem to think I’ll go along with anything if you just offer me food. I mean, I’ll listen this time, but...!”

Heine and Russell wrap up their fight while I’m buying Rose with the promise of food.

Watching them fight from a distance reminds me that these two are really strong. I’d like to avoid fighting them head-on if I can help it.

After what feels like an eternity later...

Ahead of us, Heine and Russell stop as they reach something.

“Looks like this is the place...”

After going through countless small rooms, they’ve entered a large and spacious room. In the center, something lies unmoving inside an enormous glass case.

I can tell what it is even from this distance.

It’s a giant robot.

Heine spends a little time staring at the robot inside the case before shaking her head and saying rather cheerfully, “So that’s the ace in the hole for taking out the Sand King. It’s certainly big enough...”

Russell nods. “Yeah. Of course, this was originally made to wipe out the monkeys infesting the surface. Meaning once we exterminate the Sand King, we can move on to getting rid of those obnoxious humans.”

I think we can make our move now. Alice and I nod to each other, then signal the others.

Oblivious to our actions, Heine tries to calm Russell down. “You’re still planning to do that...? Do you really hate humans that much?”

“Yes—yes I do. It’s also what my creator wanted. Are you saying you *don’t* hate them, Heine? I’ve heard they’ve done some horrible things to you.”

Heine lets out a bitter laugh at Russell’s question. “Sure, I’ve had my share of humiliations, but this is war. If I sought revenge for every little thing they did, the war would never— Actually, you know what? There is someone I hate. I’d love to put an end to a certain son of a bitch, at the very least.”

“R-really? I see. I’m assuming you mean that guy we met in Toris? If the opportunity arises, I’ll let you kill him.”

I stealthily approach behind them as they're busy with their conversation.

"Well, once this thing's activated, I'm sure the war won't take very long. All right, Russell, I'm counting on you."

"Leave it to me... Yup, looks like it's in good shape. Doesn't look like anything's malfunctioning. At this rate..."

I silently close the distance.

"DIIIIIE!"

"Wha—?!"

I catch Russell completely flat-footed, landing a hard kick between his legs from behind.

5

"Russell of the Water, pillar of the Demon Lord's Elite Four, falls before me!"

"Russell?!" Heine lets out a pained scream as Russell collapses to the ground.

Having closed the distance, we surround her.

"Hands where I can see them!"

"S-S-Six?! What are *you* doing here...?!"

Heine, who has yet to recover from her shock, obeys and raises her hand as Alice and I point our guns at her.

"We'll be taking this weapon off your hands now. If you resist, we'll make you watch as we shoot the brat next to you."

""""Yikes...""""

I explained the plan to them earlier, but my subordinates look thoroughly disgusted by my actions.

At my words, Heine seems to fully understand what's going on, and her expression slowly turns to surprise. "Y-y-you bastard! W-wait. Have you been following us the whole time?! Was your plan to take all the spoils at the end?!"

"Yep, you got it. It's been smooth sailing for us since you two took care of all the obstacles."

"That's so messed up! You scumbag! There are lines you shouldn't cross...!" Heine protests (however little that's worth), tears welling in her eyes.

But I mean, c'mon, we're an evil organization. What are we supposed to do...?

Besides, I didn't get any Evil Points this time, so this isn't even a particularly villainous thing to do.

"Don't sweat the small stuff. Just come along quietly as a prisoner... Ah, that reminds me, Heine. Earlier, you said 'Actually, you know what? There is someone I hate. I'd love to put an end to a certain son of a bitch, at the very least.' Who were you talking about, hmm?"

"*Heep?! I—I—I wasn't talking about you...*"

Even as I bully her, Heine keeps casting worried glances at the motionless Russell.

Oh, right, this brat knows all about what's in here. I need to wake him up and get the information out of him.

"Hey, Alice, go extract some information from that brat."

"Got it..." Responding quickly to my instructions, Alice bends over to check on Russell. "Um, there might be one teensy problem with that request, though," she says. "He's not breathing. Looks like you landed a critical hit. Good work, Six."

"Russell!" Heine lets out another cry.

"Wha? You serious?! Oh crap! H-hey, wake up! Alice, can you do something about this?!"

"I'll inject him with a stimulant, I guess. Not much we can do if that doesn't work."

Everyone but Alice and I seem pretty appalled at the situation. Still, it looks like the shot worked, and Russell eventually comes to.

"Guh... Wh-what happened...?"

"Well, good morning. You almost died from one of my blows. But since the fight was pretty much over, we decided to have mercy on you and get you back up."

The color hasn't quite returned to Russell's face, and I give him the rundown.

"Wow, that's a pretty audacious claim, considering how he panicked after the attack was too effective."

"And now he's declaring himself the winner..."

"Wow, even Lord Zenarith thinks this is too much. Are you sure we should keep following the commander?"

The peanut gallery continues its hushed discussion as Russell observes his surroundings.

"...Ah, I see, I took a sneak attack. And then you waited for me to come to because you wanted to steal the weapon, right?"

"Good guess! Well, now, no sudden moves. If you twitch the wrong way, I'll go ahead and attack you and this machine."

"I get that I'm a demon and all," Heine interjects, "so this might

sound like a weird question...but how in the hell do you live with yourself?"

She's going on about something, but right now the giant weapon is more important.

"First, you're gonna open this up. Then you'll listen to our instructions and teach us how to operate this big bastard."

"Miss Snow," Rose whispers, *"this whole situation makes me feel like a really evil villain. I can't keep watching this."*

"D-don't look at me... This is for the good of the country. Yes, the good of the country..."

"Snow, try saying that while looking me in the eye," Grimm says.

I continue to ignore them and listen to Russell's explanation instead.

"Activation is easy. Anyone that's involved with this facility can start it."

It's almost anticlimactic as Russell obediently opens the glass case and begins talking. Maybe he's afraid of me after my powerful blow almost killed him.

"So how do you actually move it?"

"Like this."

In response to my question, Russell shimmers briefly and... disappears?!

"Six, what the hell was that?! It swallowed up Russell of the Water!" Snow exclaims frantically while I hit the machine.

But the robot's interior begins to flash as though it's got a heartbeat...!

"Dammit! I'm startin' to think we might be too late...!"

"Six, get the hell away from it! Forget about stealing that thing! We have to destroy it!"

I follow Alice's warning and beat a hasty retreat as a giant hand emerges from the opened glass case, big enough to crush a person.

I've seen this type of weapon countless times. The Heroes love these things.

Yep, the thing standing up from the glass is a giant humanoid robot.

"FREEEEZE!" I yell at the robot, keeping my gun trained.

For a moment, it look like Russell is going to ignore me, but he stops moving when he catches sight of me pointing the gun.

He shouldn't have any idea what a gun even is, but Heine's reaction to having one pointed at her is apparently enough to give him a good guess.

"S-Six, s-surely that's going too far..." Snow backs away, but

now's really not the time to arguing about this.

Heine raises her hands, and I step behind her, treating her like a human shield, gun barrel pointed at her back. I don't know why, but it feels like my allies are repulsed just as much as the enemy.

Heine, still at gunpoint, lets out a deep sigh.

And then...

"Russell, can I leave the rest to you?"

"Yeah, now that I have this, it's not a problem. Go on ahead."

I connect the dots of their conversation—this is the part where Heine escapes using some sort of device.

As if to confirm my suspicion, Heine reaches into her cleavage and retrieves a single stone...!

"Six, it's a draw this time! But next time... Wha?! Hey, don't... EEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!"

"Nice try!"

I shove my hand into Heine's cleavage hoping to grab the stone first, but unfortunately, I'm a heartbeat too slow.

It must have been a teleportation item of some kind. Heine vanishes, and in her place she leaves...

"Huh, congrats, Six. Got yourself a gem, eh?"

Yes—I'm holding Heine's bra.

"Th-that's... Ah, Heine must have used a teleport stone. It must have left the undergarment because Six was holding it," Snow explains.

"That means Heine just arrived at the Demon Lord's castle topless, doesn't it...?" Grimm observes, her face an emotionless mask.

"H-Heine...", Russell mutters softly with a grimace.

An announcement rings in my mind, confirming those observations.

<Evil Points Acquired>



I run back toward the path we came in from, escaping from the chamber.

“Damned monkey! Hold still! I’ll crush you for humiliating Heine!” Russell chases after me with his giant robot, calling me a monkey all the while.

“Oh, shut up! Do you really want Heine’s undergarments that badly, you pervy brat? Here, you can have her bra! Just go away!” In a slightly desperate move, I toss the bra toward the pursuing robot.

“Wh-what the hell?! Heine and I aren’t...” Russell trails off, stopping for a moment as the fluttering lingerie catches his eye.

We use that opening to flee into a smaller room. Russell looks a bit upset that his prey escaped as we take the long way around him.

“So we’ve managed to take cover, but what are we going to do now? I think that’s a little too big to take on directly...,” Rose says between labored breaths. She’s right; I can’t think of any weapons that would be useful against a target that big.

“Wait, can he even get out of this place? Looks like this little room is the only way out...”

“That would be lovely, but I doubt the ancients were that stupid. I’m sure there’s a door designed for that giant to use.”

As Snow and Grimm speculate, Alice identifies our way out.

“Let’s just head back to the entrance. If he can’t get out, we can just leave. If he follows us, we’ll come back inside and try to wait him out.”

“Sounds like a plan. I doubt anything that big can move for long without resupplying.”

We head back toward the ruin entrance in accordance with Alice’s plan.

Unfortunately, but not necessarily surprisingly, we get the worst possible scenario when we arrive...

“Oh, there you are. I was starting to get tired of waiting. Sorry, but I’m not letting you go this time. I should also mention that the ruins aren’t tough enough to handle me. You’re wasting your time if you think you can hide inside.”

Waiting at the entrance in his giant robot, Russell smirks from the

cockpit.

“Well, Six? What do we do now?” Alice sounds rather calm, sitting cross-legged on the floor as our surroundings shake with the dull, distant thuds of the ruins coming down around us.

I sit there, crossing my arms and tilting my head in thought.

“He’s pretty short-tempered, so I doubt he’ll let us go even if we apologize. I feel like Heine might have let us go if we promised to defect to the Demon Lord’s Army.”

“Right now, Heine’s standing topless in front of her subordinates. I imagine she wants you dead more than anyone else,” Snow interjects as she casts a look around the room.

I thought she might be looking for another way out, but instead, she ignores our predicament and begins picking up lights and other odds and ends scattered nearby. I can’t quite decide if I’m supposed to be impressed by her dedication or not.

“Should we try one of my curses? If that thing is a magical semi-monster like a golem, my curses should work on it.”

“That thing’s probably a robot rather than type of magical creature... Hey, Grimm, test your curses on Alice. Technically, she has more in common with that giant thing than she does with golems.”

My proposal gets a response.

“Those scams again? Sure, give it a try. Hypnosis doesn’t work on androids.”

“All right, fine. I’ll show you my true power!” Grimm points her finger at Alice as the two of them stand up.

“Oh, hey, Grimm. Just in case you fail, make sure it’s a relatively light curse.”

“O Great Lord Zenarith, deliver disaster unto this blasphemous brat! Be assaulted by debris!”

Simultaneously, I hear a dull thud, and Grimm collapses to the floor as a piece of debris hits her head.

“Why is she always getting hurt *before* a fight?”

“Boss, the wall doesn’t look like it can take much more! There’s a lot more pieces falling down on us!”

I don’t even have the time to complain about Grimm being knocked out of the fight. Rose is right; the ruins are collapsing much more quickly.

“H-hey, Six, don’t you have any tricks up your sleeve?” Snow pleads. “Look at all this treasure! It’ll be worth a small fortune if I can take it back. We can’t give up now!”

“You idiot! Throw those away! That junk will just slow you down!”

Dammit, how do we get out of this?!

Just as I'm trying to sort out this mess in my mind...

"...Boss, it seems like he and I are related in some way. Do you want me to try talking to him...? Besides, I might be able to learn something about who I am in the process..."

As I'm in the middle of debating offering up the good-looking (but otherwise problematic) Snow as a sacrifice, Rose hesitantly offers her idea.

It takes me a moment to realize it might actually work.

"All right, it's worth a try! Okay, Rose, to work up your rapport with him, start emphasizing the whole 'Grandpa was right that humans are the enemy' and—"

...I cut myself off at that point.

Rose had tried to sound happy and casual when she suggested it, but on a closer look, I notice she's trembling.

I don't know what she's afraid of. Is she afraid of learning about her identity? Or is she afraid of the robot? Then again, given her love of fighting, she might not be frightened at all; maybe she's trembling with excitement.

Still...

"Actually, stay here and protect this useless old priestess."

"Do you actually have a plan?" Rose interjects without a pause.

"Hey, trainee, you think Kisaragi can't handle that thing? Kisaragi's technology is awesome. We can take on a clumsy hunk of scrap metal like that without breaking a sweat."

"W-wait, since when am I a trainee?! I thought I said no!"

I ignore Rose's protest and turn to Alice. "So, Alice, that's the situation. Have any good solutions?"

"There is one," she respond immediately. "But it's risky. First, give up on recovering that robot. Also, are you prepared for your point balance to fall into the negatives again?"

"I thought we couldn't do that anymore. Every time I send in a request that would drop me into the red, they don't send me anything."

Ordinarily if your Evil Points fall below zero, the punishment squad comes after you. However, since I figured they couldn't send the punishment squad after me on this planet, I planned to go on a negative point spending spree, but...

"If they let you borrow points, you'd have spent yourself into oblivion. So I had them make it impossible for you to borrow points if it isn't an emergency. Pay back what you owe me before you complain."

"I'm glad you understand me so well. Could you wait a bit longer on the loans?"

Still, being able to spend more points than I have is pretty handy. I don't think that even counts as a risk, really.

My face must have been giving away my thoughts, and Alice continues her line of questions. Her tone suggests she knows my answer, but she asks anyway. "The last problem is that you need to buy us time. You'll have to take on that thing by yourself for a bit."

I confidently snort out a laugh. "Buying time is my specialty. You're talking to Agent Six, tenacity in power armor. I don't know what you're going to order, but I'll leave that to you, my brainy partner."

"I feel nothing but concern over your personality and mental state, but when it comes to fighting, I trust you, my brawny partner."

This mouthy android. Why is she only reassuring at times like this?

She smacks me on the back and picks up her Kisaragi device.

"Alice, what do you need me to do?"

"You and Rose are going to assist me. You'll need to follow orders to the letter. The longer it takes to assemble, the lower Six's chance of survival, got it?"

What's she planning to assemble?

...You know what? I'm not even gonna bother thinking about it. Thinking is her job, after all.

I jump outside and head toward Russell, who is pressed up against the ruins.

"It is I, Kisaragi Corporation Operative Agent Six! Stop making such a racket, you damn brat! If you want to bang things against a wall, go get a hotel room and do it there!"

I set my power armor's strength boosters to maximum, taking a swing at its foot...!

7

After punching Russell's giant robot's foot, I...

"The hell?! If you're going to run around like that, you shouldn't have come out in the first place!"

"Oh, shut up! This is all part of my clever scheme! I don't know what kind of energy you're using, but I doubt anything that big can run for long!"

...have been focusing on evading any attacks, running around the

robot's feet and tossing taunts at every opportunity.

"This thing uses the pilot's life force as fuel! A mere mortal might get exhausted quickly, but if it's a Chimera like me at the controls, it can run for hours! Dammit, stop moving!" Russell stomps around in irritation. Each step sends a quiver through the ground, almost tripping me.

I'm not actually waiting for him to run out of energy; I only said that to explain why I bothered to come out and start scurrying about.

"You say that, but you seem kinda worried! No idiot's going to take what an enemy says at face value! I'm used to endurance matches. It'll take you hours to catch me!"

"Grrr, you little...! Screw it! I'm going to crush your friends first while you watch!" Russell shouts, turning the robot around to resume destroying the ruins...

"Whoa! Wh-what are you doing?! Now I'm pissed! I'm going to crush you flat!"

...but is promptly interrupted by the shots I fire at the cockpit. He quickly resumes chasing me.

Even if all I'm doing is buying time, this is nerve-racking. The worst part is that I don't have a real way to fight back.

"Oh, for the love of...! Why are you doing this?! You can't even scratch me! Just give up and surrender already!"

...Wait, no. I actually do have a way to fight back.

As Russell loses patience and turns his back to me, I draw my favorite weapon from behind me.

"Leave me an opening, and I'll chop you to pieces!"

Seems he let his guard down, thinking I couldn't do anything to him.

As the robot stands there, unconcerned with losing sight of me, I leap forward and slash with my R-Buzzsaw.

"Wh-whoa?! Wh-what are you...?!"

As I cut a gash into the giant robot's ankle, it loses its balance and falls onto its butt—and I almost end up crushed underneath. That was a little too close for comfort.

"Hey now, looks like this ancient weapon isn't as tough as it looks. It's pretty lame, actually!"

"Y-you...! That's *enough!*"

Russell flies into a rage at my umpteenth taunt, but he seems to realize it's quicker to take my companions hostage than to try to get to me directly.

He only turns his gaze toward me and resumes demolishing the ruins.

Looks like he figured out I was trying to buy time. Still, I can't just let

him destroy the ruins...!

The moment of hesitation may have been my undoing as the giant robot stops attacking the walls and jumps at me, ignoring the risk of damage.

I feel an enormous impact, and then everything seems to grow a little brighter—no, that's not right. Seems I lost consciousness, if only for a moment.

I'm driven by an instinctual need to escape, but I can only move my right arm.

Crap, this isn't good.

I look toward Russell in the hopes I can get out of this with clever wordplay, but it seems my taunts were a little too effective.

Sitting in the giant robot's cockpit, Russell wears the creepily ruthless smile only children can pull off. Step by step, he makes his way toward me.

"Don't think I'll let you die so easily."

Russell utters a line worthy of a third-rate villain.

"That was a dumb thing to say. You're tempting fate, you know."

I remain in a slumped pose, offering a warning that comes from my greater experience in villainy.

Russell snorts mockingly, raising his arm toward me—

—and freezes at a sound that echoes from inside the ruins.

Guess the sound got his attention.

"What's making that noise?" Russell looks down at me, his features wary.

"Wow... Can't believe she ordered *that* of all things..."

It's a low rumble familiar to every Combat Agent.

It's a reassuring sound if it's on your side, and a terrifying one if it's not—the engine notes that every long-term Kisaragi employee can recognize in their sleep.

At the same time, the sound of something hitting a surface rings out from inside the ruins. It's similar to the one Russell made demolishing the walls.

Russell's expression slowly turns to one of alarm as the smashing noises and vibrations grow stronger.

The source emerges from the ruins, annihilating the walls in its wake.

“Wh-what is...?”

Russell gapes when he sees it.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, partner. The cavalry’s here.” The heroic line rings out from the speaker equipped on the thing’s exterior.

I can’t blame Russell for staring.

My badass partner is piloting a vehicle that gives Russell’s giant robot a run for its money.

“Wh-what, wh-wh-what is that thing...?!”

Suddenly bursting through the ruin’s wall is a giant multilegged combat vehicle, the pride of Kisaragi’s vehicle fleet.

I don’t know who named it, but it’s a spider-shaped weapon nicknamed the Destroyer.

Russell stands agape, staring at it in confusion.

I, in turn, do the same thing that Alice did when I took on Gadalkand.

Forcing my pain-racked body to move, I turn to Alice riding inside the Destroyer.

“Get him!”

I hold up my right arm and give her a thumbs-up—!

8

I wake up to an unbelievable sight.

“...Hey, Alice.”

“Ah, you’re awake. I injected you with medical nanomachines. Do you feel any pain?”

I’m in my bed at the hideout.

I twist around a little bit, trying to figure out how I feel. “No, can’t say anything hurts in particular...”

“Yeah? Good. You might have hit your head, though, so I’ll run some tests later. If you end up any stupider, even I might start having a hard time.” As usual, Alice’s bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired.

“I have a lot of questions. Do you mind?”

“Sure, shoot.”

First off...

“I remember up to the point where you attacked him in your

Destroyer. What happened afterward?"

"We won of course. They had better hardware, but it came down to piloting skill. We took some damage, but I sent their robot to the scrapyards," Alice explains rather cheerfully, and I feel a weight lift from my shoulders.

It's not like I believed otherwise, but I'm still impressed by my partner. Ordinarily she's a mouthy piece of junk, but she comes through when it counts.

"You mentioned taking damage. Is everything all right?"

"Yep. This Destroyer is a valuable asset; we had to put you into point debt to get it, after all. I'll need a little time to repair it, but it'll be fully functional again."

I actually was referring to Alice, who had been piloting the thing, but I guess she's fine.

"After you passed out, we destroyed the giant weapon and took down Russell. Snow and Rose managed to capture that brat."

"Oh, that's good. I've actually got plans for that kid. And what happened after? Where are the Demon and Toris armies?"

"Toris's army beat a hasty retreat when I threatened them with the Destroyer. Tiger Man and the other Combat Agents took care of the Demon Lord's Army using guerilla tactics. I took the opportunity to claim some land from both the demons and Toris. Meaning we're done with Astaroth's assignment, too."

After hearing Alice's explanation, I let out a sigh of relief.

"The princess mentioned wanting to come to a peaceful settlement with Toris, but they're still being stubborn. They still feel they have the upper hand because they control water crystal exports."

"Ah, gotcha." So we just have to solve the water problem now.

"That's about all of it. Any other questions?"

I decide to ask Alice the question that's been bothering me the most. "Okay, well then, I did want to ask... Why were you pulling down my underwear?"

That's right.

I woke up to Alice pulling down my underwear.

"I wasn't taking them off; I was putting them on."

"Doesn't matter! Why are you putting underwear on me while I'm sleeping?! What is it? Did your curiosity get the better of you? Could you not resist checking out my impressive package?" I pull my underwear up all the way, carefully stowing everything in its proper place.

"I'm not interested in your Chunchunmaru. I was just taking care of your lower body needs."

"Don't call it Chunchunmaru! At least give it a more intimidating name...! Uh wait, my lower body needs? You were acting as my

caretaker?" Another question comes to mind as I process what Alice just said. "How long was I out?"

"About three days. If you're out that long, you're going to end up doing number one and two in bed."

Seriously...? "Damn, guess I'm off the marriage market..." I cover my face with my hands and begin crying.

"If you end up a lonely old man, I'll take care of you until you croak, partner. So don't be so melodramatic, Mr. Poopypants."

I'm not sure if she's trying to reassure me or if she's taunting me.

"...I guess. Doesn't look like Astaroth's going to budge. Grimm's a ticking time bomb, and Rose scares me. Snow is completely out of the question. I guess I'll have to settle for you..."

"Settle for me, huh? That's pretty rich coming from you, scumbag." Alice tosses a jab my way, but I can see a rare hint of amusement in her expression.

"That reminds me. Can you have your body modified to have bigger boobs and be a little taller? Also, get a TENGA installed while you're at it."

"You're lucky I'm an android. If you said that to a normal woman, no one would blame them for killing you."

As Alice remarks with a sigh, I come to a realization. "Android... That's it! Why didn't I think of this earlier? Remember that demon Grimm summoned the other day? Try making a wish with him! Ask him to upgrade you from a mouthy android to a pretty human girl..."



“Well, that’s some attitude coming from someone who could barely move from all his injuries. And to think I cleaned up your messes for you. But if that’s how you want to play it, fine!”

As Alice throws my pants at me, I remember something important.

“Now wait, Alice. We’re not done cleaning up. Come with me for a bit.”

I grin at Alice’s suspicious glance.

Alice leads me down a flight of dimly lit stairs. Following us is my special guest—a bit of insurance in case our negotiations fail.

At the bottom of the stairs is a stinking pit of a dungeon.

And then...

“Hey, you’re looking good.”

Inside the dungeon, both arms secured with long chains, is Russell of the Water.

He lets out an unamused snort as he hears my voice. “I can’t believe you’re still alive after the beating I gave you. Tenacious, aren’t you?”

“Tenacity’s Mr. Six’s middle name. Honestly, my bosses call me that, and I don’t really like it, so could you not?”

Russell fixes me with a mocking glare. “I still can’t accept that I lost to someone as disgusting as you... Well, I guess I lost to that little one there. *You* were powerless against my weapon. I don’t know why you look so triumphant when you got your butt kicked by a kid like me.”

Russell grins, spitting out a string of insults. I guess he’s trying to anger me as revenge for all that taunting.

“You’re right. I’m a lowly minion after all.”

“...Just like that? How boring. You’re just going to own up to it? *Sigh*. I still don’t get why Gadalkand lost to you.”

When I casually accept his attempt at mockery, Russell puts his hands behind his head and leans back, as if to demonstrate he’s lost interest in me.

I point my index finger at him. “But you. Well, you’re the pathetic scrub who lost to that lowly minion, making you the most useless of all. All that attitude and look where you are: in a dungeon as our prisoner! How’s it feel to be mocked by someone so lowly? Come on, tell me, loser. Ha-ha!”

“Grrrrrrrr...!”

“Six, why are you fighting with this brat anyway? I thought you needed something from him.” Alice brings me back to the task at hand before I can taunt Russell any more.

“Oh, right. That’s not why I’m here. I actually had something I

wanted to ask you.”

“Piss off.” Russell rejects my request immediately.

“...Hey, you damn brat, you should listen while Mr. Six is in a merciful mood, otherwise...”

“Go ahead. I don’t know what you’re planning to do, but go ahead and do it. Despite my looks, torture doesn’t bother me much. I guess it’s a Chimera trait. Things like heat, cold, and pain don’t bother me,” Russell jeers with the attitude of someone long past the point of caring.

Ah, that makes sense. Rose didn’t seem to mind the heat and cold in the desert. Which means what he’s saying is probably true, too.

“Let me get this out of the way. You put us through hell, but we’re enemies, and this is war. I don’t have anything personal against you. But you’re a prisoner now. If you won’t cooperate, we’ll treat you accordingly.”

“Like I said, go ahead. I’m a Chimera. I had a lot of things done to me in the name of experiments. None of that bothers me now.”

Well, that’s a problem... I was hoping to get a little more information about this Chimera stuff, too...

“Come on, stop sulking and listen. You know this country’s short on water, right? What I wanted to ask you was—”

“Oh, shut up! I have no interest in listening to your requests! Do whatever it is you’re going to do! Or are you all talk? Could it be that you can’t bring yourself to torture a kid like me? C’mon, if you’re not all talk, bring it on!”

.....

“Well, all right. I can’t do this. I give up.”

“...Are you serious? Ah, okay. I guess you’re just that desperate for water. Are you going to bow and beg for my help? It’s true that I’m skilled enough with water magic to have it in my title. It’d be easy for me to make enough water to save this kingdom. Too bad for you that I have no intention of helping...”

I interrupt Russell’s monologue and lower my head in a bow.

Not to Russell, obviously, but to the special guest standing behind me.

“I apologize, Tiger Man. I couldn’t do it. I give up.”

“Well then...leave the rest to me. In fact, you might say this is time forrr me to enjoy myself.”

At my admission of defeat, our special guest, Tiger Man, steps out of the shadows.

Alice, who had been listening quietly, looks over curiously. “I didn’t know Tiger Man was any good at torture. Can he really break someone this stubborn?”

Tiger Man doesn’t respond to Alice’s question, instead

approaching the cell as though to offer a demonstration.

“...Who the hell are you? You humans have beastmen among your ranks? Hey, beastman, can you understand what I’m saying? Ha-ha-ha, say something!”

Russell overcomes a moment of surprise at seeing Tiger Man and quickly regains enough confidence to start blustering again.

Tiger Man doesn’t say a word.

Instead, he stands there gazing intently at Russell’s face...

“Nyeow that’s some fine worrrrk, Six. I’ll buy you a drrrrink later.”

“Really? Thanks, Tiger Man. Not only are you creepy, but you’re generous! How cool!”

“You don’t need to call me crrreepy. Little Russell’s going to get upset, so don’t say things like that nyeow.”

Russell casts a suspicious glance as I exchange words with Tiger Man.

Alice appears to have figured out the situation and offers Russell some advice. “Hey, you really screwed up on this one. If you’d listened to Six, all you would’ve had to do is make water all day. Well, I hope you’re happy with Tiger Man.”

“...Huh?”

Russell tilts his head in confusion, as though he doesn’t understand what Alice is saying.

Just then, Tiger Man, in a cheerier mood than usual, purrs out in a low, husky baritone, introducing himself to Russell.

“My name is Tigerrrrr Man. A mutant that loves little childrrrrren. So much so that I plan to be modified into a little girl when I retirrrre.”

Hearing that, Russell looks utterly bewildered...

“...Huh?”

“No ‘huh’ about it. You and I arrre going to be the best of frriiends from nyeow on, Russell. Nyeot to worry, I’ll be gentle nyeow.”

Tiger Man lets out a ragged breath, gripping the cell’s bars with both hands.

“E-erm... I don’t know what you’re talking about... I hate to burst your bubble, but I’m a boy. Heh. Sorry! Can’t you tell? Is this beast blind?”

Russell doesn’t appear to understand the situation yet.

Tiger Man smiles gently and continues with his nice, low baritone.

“I know you’rrre a boy. In fact, you’rrre just my type!”

Time stops.

“...What? What are you saying?! Hey, what’s he going on about?! He’s talking nonsense!” Russell says in a sudden panic, which just seems to excite Tiger Man further.

“Little Russell has a cute face, so I bet a skirrrrt would look myarrrrvelous on him.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about!”

I admit I don’t get it, either. Still, I can say this with confidence. “Wow, Tiger Man. Mutants sure are impressive!”

“What the hell are you impressed by?! Y-you’re kidding, right? I’m a guy! You’re just threatening me, right? This can’t be happening!” Russell rambles desperately, as though he’s now aware of the danger he’s in.

“My heart is big; nyeow do you see? I don’t mind little distinctions like ‘boy’ or ‘girrrrrl.’ I can love them both equally.”

“Wow, Tiger Man. I seriously don’t get what it is you’re saying, but you’re creepy cool!”

“F-fine! I admit it, you win! I give up. I’ll go ahead and make water for you!” Russell suddenly admits defeat and offers to cooperate...

“Impressive, Tiger Man. The brat’s willing to cooperate.”

“Don’t be absurrrrd. It’s too late nyeow. No take-backs.”

“Wait! I give up! Please! I give up! S-stop...?!”

Tiger Man, who had been gripping the iron bars, yanks them out with his arms. The ruined remains of the bars land the floor near Russell’s feet.

Russell tries to back away, face locked in a twitching grimace. His voice is an octave higher than usual. “F-fine, I get it! I’ll defect to your side starting now! Combat Chimeras can be really useful!”

“Sorry, we’ve already got one of our own. It’ll be okay, Russell, I’m sure Tiger Man will take good care of you.”

Russell begins to cry, tears rolling down his cheeks and snot dribbling from his nostrils as he vigorously shakes his head from side to side.

“Nooo! NOOOOOOOO! This is wrong! So wrong! Please! Please let me make water for your kingdom! I’ll work hard every day! I promise!”

Alice lets out a dismissive snort at Russell’s pleading.

“Of course you’re going to make water. You rejected Six’s offer. You may belong to a different organization, but you still consider yourself a villain, right? In which case...”

“If you’re gonna resist, resist to the end. If you’re gonna betray your side, do it quick.”

As Alice and I offer our commentary, Tiger Man presses his face up close to Russell...!

“I guess I have no choice. I’ll let you get by with just crrross-dressing. Make sure you work harrd on your waterrr making... Though for my parrt, I wouldn’t mind if you slacked off a bit...”

Tiger Man breaks into a predatory grin.



Epilogue 1



The conference room at Kisaragi Corporation headquarters.

“Lilith, can you help me decipher Six’s report?” Astaroth hands the report printout to Lilith.

“His handwriting is messy, but I didn’t think it was bad enough to be illegible. Let me see... Sorry, nope, I can’t make heads or tails of what he’s saying, either.”

It takes a whole two seconds for Lilith to give up trying to make sense of Six’s final report.

“I’m pleased to report Tiger Man finds fulfillment in each and every day. Also, supopocchis are a lot tastier than I thought...’ What on earth is a supopocchi?”

“Don’t look at me. It also asks for me to upgrade Alice, which makes no sense, either...”

As the pair try to sort out the report’s details, Belial’s angry voice rings through the room.

“F18, F19! Care to explain your miserable performance in today’s exercise?! I know you can do better!”

“My apologies, Lady Belial... F9 and I started reminiscing about the past, and I just started to get homesick... I keep thinking about how hard it must be on Father, Mother, my sister, and all the kingdom’s citizens...”

“I, too, found myself thinking of my old companions... Heine and Russell are probably worried about me... They’ve always had a soft streak...”

The two men dressed in combat suits close their eyes, letting out a nostalgic sigh.

Belial looks at the pair rather skeptically. “Eh, I honestly doubt it. I don’t know how famous both of you were back in your country, but it’s pretty common for people to just forget about you after a week or two.”

“Lady Belial, surely that wouldn’t happen with us! I’m a prince and the Chosen One! I’m sure my kingdom has been in a panic since the moment I vanished...”

“While my loyal minions must still be looking for their lost pillar of the Elite Four...!”

The pair passionately object to Belial, spittle flying from their

mouths, but are promptly silenced by Belial's fist.

"Stop it with the Chosen One nonsense! You sound as stupid as Agent Six! And you, no calling yourself an Elite Four member without permission!"

Astaroth turns her gaze to the fussy trio abuzz in their corner. "I have to give those two credit. I thought for certain they'd wilt under Belial's training regime..."

"Agreed, that was a pleasant surprise. But Belial's always been the nurturing type. And it seems those two have seen their fair share of battle."

The two rookies suddenly appeared on Belial's lawn, and despite the endless battles against the Heroes, the pair has managed to produce results.

"I thought about sending them to reinforce Six, but perhaps it's better to keep them with us for the time being."

"It'd be a bit cruel to send them off to that planet within a few months of starting here. Hate to do this to him, but Six will have to make do with what he's got. We've survived this latest counteroffensive by the Heroes, but it's too early to let our guard down."

The two then turn their gaze back to the report.

"...So what's this mokemoke...?"

"Again, don't ask me. I'll have Alice write up a final report, too. We can compare the two and use that to figure out the details. As far as I can tell, though, it sounds like we've acquired some new territory...?"

The report is filled with sentences that are little better than gibberish.

But one stands out in particular...

"This last bit about narrowly avoiding disaster after trying to put socks on Grimm..."

"I know Grimm is one of Six's subordinates. But I can't understand what socks have to do with disaster..."

The two exchange glances and tilt their heads in puzzlement.



Epilogue 2 Undead Festival



A bit of time has passed since we made Russell solve our water crisis.

After nearly coming to blows with the kingdom of Toris due to an unfortunate series of misunderstandings, it appears relations between the two countries are slowly being repaired. Sounds like we'll eventually resume things like trade.

Everything seems to be going just great, but...

"I don't want to see your face, Commander! I've had nothing but awful things happen to me since I joined this unit! I go to Toris and get rejected by every guy I talk to, I go to the desert and get mummified, I'm forced to wear socks, I go to the city meetup event and get rejected by every guy I talk to!!"

"Only one of those things has anything to do with me! And how the hell was I supposed to know that would happen with a lousy pair of socks?! If anything, I'm the victim there!"

Grimm's decided an argument in the middle of the kingdom of Grace training grounds is a great idea.

"Fine, if you're that upset about it...I'll request that they give you a transfer...", I tell her.

Grimm's eyes go wide...

"Noooooooooooo!! Please, Commander, don't leave me! We've been through so much together! You're not going to just toss me aside after all that, are you? ARE YOU?!"

"You're the one bitching about everything! What the hell do you want from me?! Since we're on the subject, most of the time you're out of the fight before it even starts! You didn't do a damn thing this last time! You're fired! Fired!! I'm going to recruit someone more useful! The clumsy magic girl or that old man we were talking about last time..."

Grimm clings to my arm, bawling her eyes out.

"But, Commander! We even went on a date! We've seen each other's underwear! And you're still going to leave me?! If you do, I'm going to curse yooooou!"

"You're a piece of work, you know that?! What do you *really* want?!"

Grimm continues to cry, wailing loudly. "Alice calls me a scammer! And I can't act during the day, so I can't do as much as

Snow or Rose...! Wait, that's it! Let me have a chance to prove myself! A situation where I can shine!" she suggests, adding to my headaches, clinging to my sleeve, and showing no sign of letting go.

"A situation where you can shine, huh...? I mean, what can you actually do?"

"How about a wedding venue? You get points for evil deeds, right? So! What if we curse a couple to never be able to marry just as they're about to exchange their wedding vows..."

And then the backlash from the curse...

"Yeah... I can already see the punch line where you doom yourself to the life of an eternal spinster."

"Shush! I mean, I feel that'd happen, too, but saying it out loud is just tempting fate!" The loudly obnoxious Grimm is taking my teasing rather seriously.

"Grimm, there you are! It's an emergency. The princess wishes to see you!" Snow shouts as she runs onto the training ground.

Grimm and I exchange glances.

"Uh-oh. She's about to fire you..."

"Stop that! You're making me anxious! But I can guess what the princess wants, given the time of year. Commander, can you wheel me over? I'll have the princess explain to you just how useful I can be!" Grimm gestures toward me, urging me along.

"C'mon, you two, get moving! The royal oracle says this year's is going to be the worst on record!" Snow looks a bit more stressed than usual...

"This year's what? Just what is the worst on record? Grimm, what's she talking about?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out. Every woman's got her secrets, don't you know?" Grimm chuckles teasingly, poking my nose with her index finger.

.....

"When women tease me, I get the urge to strip them naked..."

"I'm sorry! It's just your cute subordinate being playful!"

Grimm hurriedly puts some space between the two of us, then points to the darkening sky.

"A festival! A lovely festival! The undead festival is upon us!"

[Final Report]

Agent 6 has succeeded in damaging the relations between the kingdom of Grace and one of its neighbors.

We've achieved the territorial expansion quota for Kisaragi by escalating this situation into a war.

During said war, we captured a business competitor's mutant. Said mutant is currently under Tiger Man's command. According to the information from this mutant, this planet once had a super-advanced civilization.

While we were unable to recover the methods of creating Chimeras or other useful information during our last operations, we are now aware that the presence of creatures (such as giant magical monsters) that could not have evolved on their own is due to said ancient civilization.

We will now focus our attention on securing any remaining facilities belonging to this ancient civilization and continue investigations.

Additionally, it appears that this planet holds an event called an Undead Festival during this time of year.

As a pinnacle of technological achievement, I believe it's my mission to disrupt an event so steeped in superstition and the supernatural. I will report on these activities at a later date.

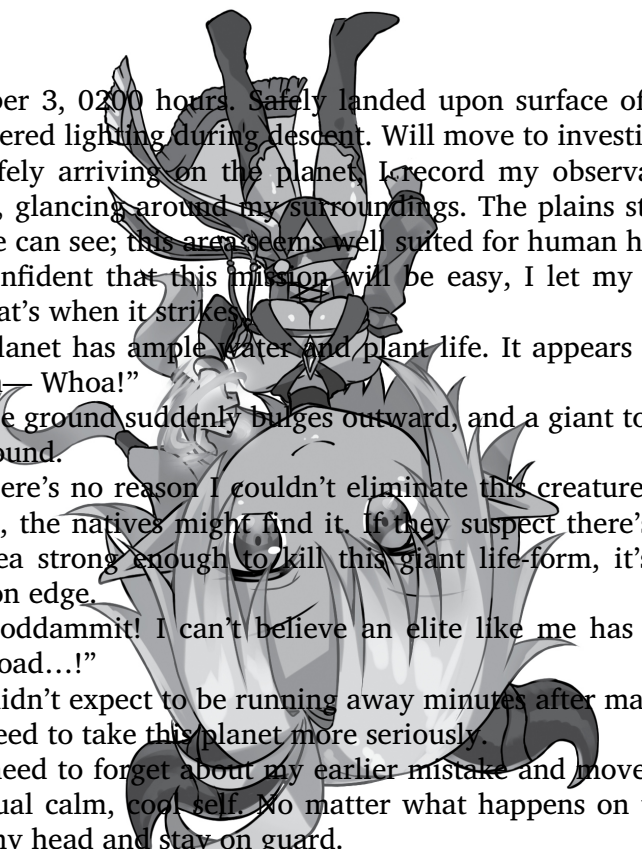
Final Reporting Operative

Supernatural Buster, Alice Kisaragi

////////////////////////////////////

“God’s Blessing on This Wonderful Planet!”

////////////////////////////////////



“October 3, 0200 hours. Safely landed upon surface of target planet. Discovered lightning during descent. Will move to investigate.”

Safely arriving on the planet, I record my observations into my device, glancing around my surroundings. The plains stretch as far as the eye can see; this area seems well suited for human habitation.

Confident that this mission will be easy, I let my guard down—and that’s when it strikes.

“Planet has ample water and plant life. It appears to be ideal for human— Whoa!”

The ground suddenly bulges outward, and a giant toad pops out of the ground.

There’s no reason I couldn’t eliminate this creature, but if I leave it here, the natives might find it. If they suspect there’s something in the area strong enough to kill this giant life-form, it’s likely to put them on edge.

“Goddammit! I can’t believe an elite like me has to run from a mere toad...!”

I didn’t expect to be running away minutes after making landfall. I may need to take this planet more seriously.

I need to forget about my earlier mistake and move on—return to my usual calm, cool self. No matter what happens on this planet, I’ll keep my head and stay on guard.

“Encountered a hostile giant toad immediately after landing! As this is a survey mission, decided it would be more prudent to conduct a tactical retreat! Reporting Recorder: Agent Twenty-Two!”

And so began my life upon this awful rock—

“October 17, 0600 hours. About to head to the construction site for work.”

Waking inside a barn, I speak to my device, starting my day’s

recording.

It's been two weeks since I arrived on this planet.

Learning the local language was a bit tricky, but it wasn't a great obstacle for an elite like myself.

Life here is going pretty well. In fact, due to the lack of entertainment, my day-to-day routine consists of waking up early and going to bed early, engaging in healthy manual labor each day. The simplicity of this life makes me rethink my priorities on Earth.

I'm struggling to come to grips with the fact there's no difference between my Kisaragi salary and my part-time job here as a construction worker.

Back on Earth, people used to run in terror at the mere sight of me, but no one in this city seems to mind. According to my colleagues, it's pretty common for black-haired, black-eyed people with strange names and wearing funny clothing to suddenly spring out of thin air in this city.

As I'm busily repairing the outer wall, like any other day, an unfamiliar young woman calls over to me.

"Hey there. Let me show you how it's done!"

The blue-haired woman appears out of nowhere, then begins an impressive demonstration of her wall-painting skills.

"...Say, is that blue-haired girl a master crafter?"

"Hmm? No, the maintenance chief is a part-timer. She comes by when she needs spending money."

The workers around her greet the young woman, all of them calling her the maintenance chief. She seems pleased at the welcome. But why "chief," of all things...?

Still, it appears that on this planet, even girls working part-time have an impressive array of skills.

My initial survey suggested the technology level on this planet was low, but it looks like I have to rethink that assessment.

—It was at that moment.

"Chief! The wall's collapsed, and we've got wounded! Need you to go heal 'em."

It appears there was an accident, and the crew boss shouts out for help.

"Sacred Highness Heal!"

I hear the chief chanting something and look over to her. In the blink of an eye, the wounded are healed.

I stare at the impossible scene before me.

"Geez! Like I always say, double-check to make sure everything's secure! Sheesh!"

"Sorry about that, Chief. Thanks for your help, as usual! I owe you a crimson beer!"

The recovered workers walk up to thank the chief...

Hold on a minute. Given the miracle I just witnessed, a pint of beer seems like an awfully cheap reward!

But based on the chief's happy expression, it's more than enough for a thank-you.

Seems our maintenance chief will fix up people for a cheap pint of beer. Something's wrong with this planet's medical care.

"October 24, 2300 hours. Hereby initiating Evil Point acquisition."

I've been here for three weeks now.

I learned the instant healing I saw last week was magic. It sounds like something out of a fantasy novel, but I can't deny it, having seen it for myself.

Today I'm going to put the talk of magic off to the side and try to replenish some of my Evil Points. I'll start out with some acts of petty villainy, and if things get out of hand, I can solve that with violence.

Once I make my decision, I head out. As I'm wandering around town, I earn points by doing things like flipping over trash cans.

"You. What are you doing! Stop making a mess of the dump sites. You're going to get in trouble with the Crow Slayer!"

A beautiful blond-haired, blue-eyed woman dressed in a slutty suit worthy of a naughty schoolteacher tries to stop me.

"Crow...? What the hell are you talking about? As for trouble, well, you're the one in trouble now. What's a woman doing alone at this late an hour? Heh... I'll make you regret your lack of caution...!"

"Wh-what? How dare you!"

I was just planning to threaten her a little, but instead of fear, all I see from her is surprise. Since I'm not getting any Evil Points, I can rule out the possibility that she feels threatened in any fashion.

"I didn't think there were any men like that left in the city! I don't know what you're planning to do to me, but I've already decided that I'll only ever let one man do such things to me!"

"Heh-heh... I wonder what sort of expressions I'll see if I drag you in front of your man and strip you naked... Whoa, wait, stop blushing! What's wrong with you?"

The mysterious beauty's cheeks flush red, and she starts squirming for some reason. "Th-that—that's because you started proposing some advanced cuckolding play! There might have been a time I'd have been tempted, but I'm not so easily seduced, villain!"

"Wow, what the hell is wrong with you? Is this culture shock or something?" *I mean, I know values are different between countries, but is this what passes for normal on this planet...?*

"I can't leave a late-stage pervert like you to roam the streets unchecked! Go on, make your move! I'll capture you! Don't even *think*

of capturing me instead and dragging me in front of him!”

“I don’t know why, but I think it’s really unfair for you to be calling me a late-stage pervert! This may be a cheap thing to do to a civilian like you, but I can’t have Kisaragi being treated so disrespectfully! Time for a nap, girl!”

I don’t need to have her causing a scene, so I punch in her the face, hoping to knock her out. The woman just stands there in silence.

“Y-you...!” I shout.

“.....”

Thinking I must have held back too much, I put all my strength behind a punch to her stomach. If she noticed it, the mysterious beauty gives no sign of it.

If anything, she’s starting to look sad, as though disappointed by my attacks.

“I’m leaving...,” I mutter under my breath, turning to go home with a frown. I was the attacker, but for some reason, my fist is hurting. Given that my punches didn’t earn me any Evil Points, it seems those attacks didn’t even register as villainy to the woman.

Seems the reason there aren’t any guns on this planet might not be restricted to a lack of technology.

I guess I need to revise my way of thinking.

“October 31, 1000 hours. Today I will investigate magic.”

I speak to my device and set out.

While doing construction by the front gate, I noticed that in this city, adventurers were responsible for hunting. The target of these hunts were the giant toads I met on my first day here.

As terrifying as it sounds, those giant predators are actually quite low on this planet’s food chain.

And currently—

“Attention everyone! We’re facing an overabundance of toads! We’re offering bonuses for bringing in toad parts!”

The huge number of them that had spawned outside the city are being hunted down one after the other.

The news makes my head hurt, but I’m trying to focus on learning about magic today.

As I’m searching for a survey target, I see a young girl dressed in stereotypical mage clothing.

“Yo, Megumin. I’ll give you candy if you’ll go hunt over there.”

“Yeah, we’d appreciate it if you’d go far away.”

The adventurers are shooing away the survey target, a girl evidently named Megumin. Given that they seem to be calling her by a nickname, it doesn’t seem like they’re doing it out of malice.

I presume they’re treating her rather coldly because she’s still a

fledgling mage. She does appear young, after all.

“If you keep treating me poorly, you’re going to regret it later!”

“Yeah, all right, whatever. Go ahead and cast your spell. What’s your guardian Kazuma doing anyway...?”

If she has a guardian, that confirms my assumption that she’s still a novice.

I watch the rather saccharine little scene with a faintly sour smile on my lips when—

“Exploosion!”

I freeze as I see the girl’s spell.

A sudden, massive explosion incinerates the toads.

“Well done. I’ll go ahead and carry you home. Sheesh, what the hell is Kazuma up to...?”

“Hey! At least treat me with a little more respect!”

The adventurers haul off the impressive girl as though she’s an inconvenient sack of luggage.

Actually, based on how the others reacted, it might be that her spell isn’t all that impressive. The adventurers don’t seem fazed by the spell at all, continuing to hunt toads as though that blast is a daily occurrence.

I guess that girl is still a fledgling, and the spell she used was a simple, low-level spell.

I cancel the rest of my investigation and shudder, remembering that spell’s incredible blast.

“November 7, 2000 hours. Commencing...”

“You’ve come a long way for your spy mission. Impressive. Welcome.”

A shiver runs up my spine.

Instead of finishing the recording, I turn to face the man behind me.

I had thought I’d concealed my actions well enough that even a dedicated observer wouldn’t realize I was a spy.

“Oh dear. Panic and anxiety. Terrible emotions. Certainly not what I enjoy.”

For whatever reason, no one in this city appears to have thought to ask why this tall man is wearing a mask.

I don’t know how he found out about my mission, but now that he knows, he needs to be silenced.

“It’s nothing personal...” Confirming there’s no one else around, I press my pistol to the man’s chest and—!

“Ah, did you truly think you could hurt me with such a toy? Too bad! Not even a scratch!”

I hit him near the heart, but the masked man breaks out in loud

guffaws.

You have got to be kidding me... This guy, that ridiculously tough woman—is everyone on this planet invincible?

I'm supposed to be an elite combat operative. But this...

Have I been deluding myself all this time?

I stand there in stunned silence, my confidence shattered. The masked man doesn't bother to hit back and just walks off instead.

...What is the deal with this planet?

"November 29, 0600 hours. Heading to the construction site for my part-time job..."

It's been two months since I arrived here.

After picking up a few extra jobs around town, I've secured an inn room in lieu of a hideout and assembled a teleporter. All that remains is to wait for the teleporter to stabilize so I can make my way back to Japan.

I lethargically make my way to the construction site.

"Maintenance Chief, I got attacked by vegetables yesterday..."

"Aw, I'm sorry to hear that. Let me know if you get hurt, and Chief will fix you right up. Be careful if you end up dying, though. There's only a short window where I can resurrect you."

I'm grumbling about what happened yesterday at the farm to the blue-haired girl.

Based on her reaction, the events from yesterday aren't me losing my grip on sanity, but a common occurrence.

Wait a minute. I've been so surprised these past couple of months that I totally let it go the first time, but it sounds like this girl can resurrect the dead so long as they haven't been dead too long...

"Chief, I wanted to ask... I heard the other day that this is a city for new adventurers?"

"Yup, that's right. Never mind that, why do you look so worn out? Did getting attacked by vegetables scare you? Let me give you a piece of advice. When you eat a tangerine, make sure you don't get the juice in your eyes."

...I see. Even tangerines attack you here. Learn something new every day. I continue working, my eyes staring off into the distance as I file away that fact.

"If life isn't treating you well, feel free to come to me, the great goddess Aqua, for help. As your colleague, I'll be happy to help you out. In exchange, I just need you to help me when I'm short on money."

"The great goddess, Lady Aqua..."

Despite my attention wandering during the work day, for some reason those words were etched into my memory.

This is Axel, town of novice adventurers.

This country is at war with the Demon King, so the strongest adventurers go off to the frontlines.

That means the people I've seen so far are...

"December 29, 1900 hours. Conducting final survey and returning to Earth."

The teleporter is now stable, and I can return whenever I wish.

After activating my device, I head off to the city of Axel to take care of unfinished business.

I'm looking for someone weak. It doesn't matter who.

Yes, although I've been pining to go home after having my confidence shattered on this planet...

"I'm one of Kisaragi's elite Combat Agents. I can't just run away with my tail between my legs...!"

It's possible that I've just happened to run into the most powerful people on this planet.

Even if it means I'm just being a bully, I'd like to win a fight with one of the locals before going home.

I laugh at my own shattered confidence as I wander around the city at night.

"Hey there. Are you an adventurer? Could you spare a moment?"

"Me...? Wh-what is it? I have a lot of strong and noble friends behind me, you know."

The target I've chosen is an extremely weak-looking young man, and it seems I've chosen well as the boy answers with a line worthy of a two-bit lackey. Looking at me, he begins to back away.

...Of course he would. It's the normal reaction to seeing a Kisaragi operative dressed in a suit of power armor. It's the first time it's happened since I arrived here, and I can't help a tiny thrill of joy.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you. If you're an adventurer, well... Could you show me your card?"

"My adventurer card? Well, okay, but my stats kind of suck. My occupation's also the weakest around." Calming down a little, the boy hands me his card.

...Wow, that's pretty bad.

I'd done my homework around the city, and I'd looked up the stats of an average adventurer.

The boy in front of me definitely has the weakest occupation, with the stats to match.

Nothing personal, kid, but I'm going to test myself against you.

"Do you mind if we...?"

"Ah-ha! Found you guys! The hell have you been doing?! I've been getting nothing but complaints about you!"

Just as I tried to ask him to fight, the boy runs off yelling.

I reach out to stop him, but...

“Gaaaaah! It’s not my fault this time, I swear! It was Megumin’s idea...!”

...I notice where the boy is running off to and freeze.

“I—I—I was just thinking out loud. I didn’t think you would actually try...!”

“Wait, Kazuma, calm down! There’s actually a good reason for...”

Standing there are my blue-haired coworker, the tough beauty, and the explosive girl.

“Screw your excuses! I’m going to beat the crap out of all three of you!”

The three of them are running from the boy with the worst occupation...

...Which means, the low stat, weakest occupation young man is actually stronger than those three women.

My confidence is utterly shattered by that realization, and I activate the recorder on my device.

“To headquarters. I strongly recommend avoiding this planet. And...”

I utter a prayer of thanks to the planet’s goddess for saving me from starting an unwinnable fight.

“My thanks to the Goddess Aqua. Combat Agent Twenty-Two, hereby returning to Earth.”

AFTERWORD

Thank you for picking up the second volume of *Combatants Will Be Dispatched*.

It's been four short years since I became a novelist.

Lately, I've been reveling in the fact that I got to hole up in a hotel like a proper professional novelist, and that I haven't even felt guilty for massively missing a deadline.

My apologies. Please forgive me for all the trouble I've caused. I'm really sorry.

Lately, it feels like I'm constantly apologizing for one thing or another.

Anyway, in this volume none of the heroines do anything remotely heroic, but I have faith that as the volumes progress, they'll eventually start growing into their roles.

So please, I would appreciate it if you could stand by these scummy, seductive, predatory heroines for the time being.

As you can tell from the cover, this is a volume focusing on Alice.

Since this android was built to provide support for Six, it's likely she's going to continue lecturing our extremely flawed hero, while pampering him in the end.

This volume contains a few parodies and homages to my other series, *Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!*

For those who have yet to read it, you'll enjoy the short story at the end of this volume once you've finished reading the other series. (Shameless self-promotion here.)

This short story depicts the other side from the short story written as the limited-edition bonus material for the first volume of *Combatants*.

Personally, I'm a big fan of crossover works, but if you'd like to see more of the poor protagonist, you'll have to ask my editors at Sneaker Bunko.

Finally, the manga adaptation of *Combatants* by Masaaki Kiasa is running on Monthly Comic Alive.

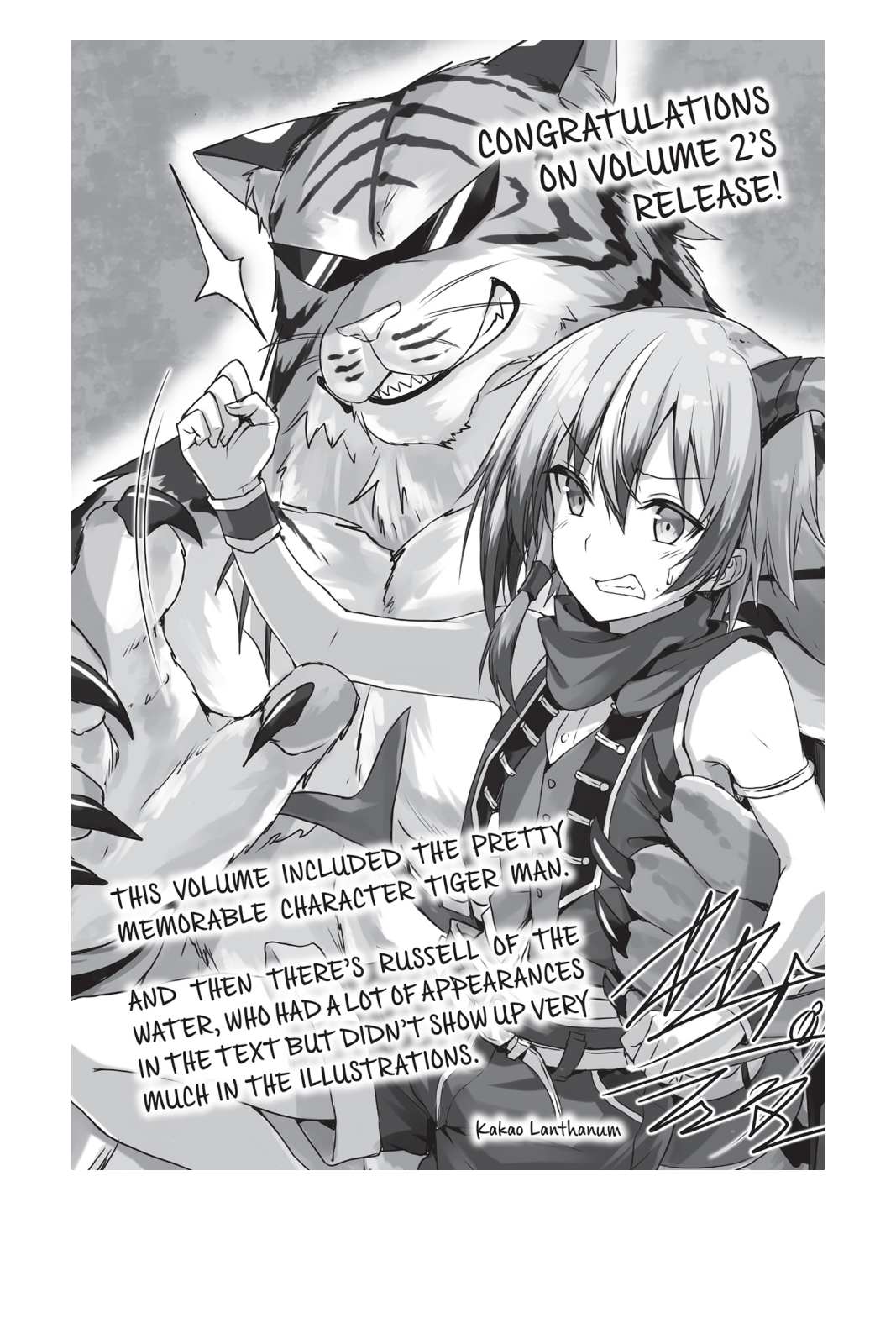
I recommend checking it out if you're interested!

Anyway, I wouldn't have been able to get this second volume out the door if not for the help of many people, starting with the illustrator Cacao Lanthanum, my editor I

editorial department, and everyone else involved in the book-production process. Thank you so very much.

And of course, last, but certainly not least, sincere thanks to all the readers who have picked up this book.

Natsume Akatsuki



CONGRATULATIONS
ON VOLUME 2'S
RELEASE!

THIS VOLUME INCLUDED THE PRETTY
MEMORABLE CHARACTER TIGER MAN.

AND THEN THERE'S RUSSELL OF THE
WATER, WHO HAD A LOT OF APPEARANCES
IN THE TEXT BUT DIDN'T SHOW UP VERY
MUCH IN THE ILLUSTRATIONS.

Kakao Lanthanum

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